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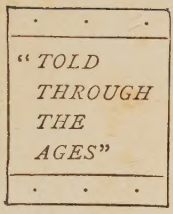

STORIES FROM GREEK TRAGEDY

TOLD THROUGH THE AGES

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Fr.

Greek Tragedy—An Audience at Athens

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STORIES FROM GREEK TRAGEDY

RETOLD BY

H. L. HAVELL B.A.

AUTHOR OF "STORIES FROM GREEK HISTORY" "STORIES FROM THE ÆNEID" "STORIES FROM THE ILIAD" "STORIES FROM THE ODYSSEY" "STORIES FROM DON QUIXOTE" ETC.

"Sometime let gorgeous Tragedy
In sceptred pall come sweeping by,
Presenting Thebes, or Pelops' line,
Or the tale of Troy divine."

MILTON *Il Penseroso*

GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD.
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PREFACE

IN this book I have tried to present in the form of prose narrative the leading incidents of ten Greek plays. It was not my object to give a critical analysis of plot and character, such as is commonly prefixed to learned editions of the Attic Tragedies, but to tell the story in its natural order, as it might have been related by an eye-witness. For this purpose it was necessary to rid my materials of the technical machinery which belongs to the representation of a drama on the stage, and, in particular, to set aside some of those restrictions which are peculiar to the Athenian drama. The part of the chorus had to be curtailed, and distributed among the active performers in the play; some change of scene was necessary to give life and movement to the action; incidents described by a messenger are generally presented at first hand, without the intervention of that personage; and the order of the scenes is sometimes changed. In one instance only, in the closing scenes of the *Medea*, I have ventured to alter the whole environment of the action, and removed into the distance a grotesque situation, which seemed to me to be a serious blot

on that otherwise powerful and brilliant study of savage passion. With these exceptions, which I hope will be conceded as inherent to the nature of my undertaking, I have studied to adhere closely to the text of my authors, and above all, to preserve the moral atmosphere and the individual character which belong to the three great masters of Attic Tragedy.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	xi
STORIES FROM ÆSCHYLUS—	
I. PROMETHEUS	1
II. THE HOUSE OF PELOPS—	
(1) AGAMEMNON	23
(2) ORESTES, PART I	52
(3) „ PART II	70
STORIES FROM SOPHOCLES—	
I. ANTIGONE	92
II. THE LAST DAYS OF HERCULES	120
III. PHILOCTETES	141
STORIES FROM EURIPIDES—	
I. MEDEA	169
II. ALCESTIS	191
III. HECUBA	210
PRONOUNCING LIST OF NAMES	232

ILLUSTRATIONS

		PAGE
GREEK TRAGEDY—AN AUDIENCE AT ATHENS	(*Sir W. B. Richmond*)	*Frontispiece*
ATLAS	(*B. Picart*) . .	12
IPHIGENEIA	(*M. Nonnenbruch*) .	24
CLYTÆMNESTRA	(*Hon. J. Collier, R.A.*)	50
THEATRE OF DIONYSUS		74
ANTIGONE STREWING DUST UPON THE BODY OF HER BROTHER . .	(*Victor J. Robertson*) .	102
THE FATES	(*Michelangelo*) . .	148
HERCULES' STRUGGLE WITH DEATH.	(*Lord Leighton*) .	204

INTRODUCTION

THE origin of Tragedy is closely connected with the worship of Bacchus, the God of Wine. "Tragedy," in its original significance, means "goat-song," or the song which was sung round the altar of Bacchus when the goat, which was especially obnoxious to the wine god as the great destroyer of the vine, was offered as a sacrifice. Such songs were called dithyrambs, and were performed in very early times by mummers, with drunken frolic and boisterous merriment. "I will sing the loud dithyramb," says Archilochus of Paros (700 B.C.), "while the wine is thundering in my brain." As an artistic form of poetry, the dithyramb begins with Arion (628-583 B.C.), an Æolic poet, who found welcome at the Court of Periander, Tyrant of Corinth. It was then performed by trained choirs of men, with mimic gestures. In this element of pantomime, which is found already in the rudest form of Bacchic worship, we recognise the beginnings of dramatic art.

Now, Bacchus appears in a twofold aspect. On the one hand he is the god of mirth and gladness, who is followed by a troop of roaring revellers—

wild bacchantes, and goat-legged satyrs, the incarnation of the animal element in man; and on the other hand he is the melancholy god, sunk in that dejection which is the necessary consequence of all excess. He was the son of Zeus by a mortal woman; his early years were darkened by the enmity of Hera, the lawful wife of Zeus; and it was only after a hard struggle that he was acknowledged in his divine character. Thus a strain of sadness was mingled with the joyous notes of dithyrambic poetry, giving it that direction which finally culminated in the great masterpieces of Attic Tragedy.

The worship of the Greek Bacchus had in process of time assimilated many elements borrowed from Thrace and Asia; and this foreign character of the god is reflected in those legends which describe him as wandering in his youth over the whole world, forcing his worship on the inhabitants of the various countries which he visited, and returning, by way of Thrace, into Greece. From Asia came that orgiastic extravagance which is so finely described by Catullus, and the mystical character which exalted a rude and primitive cult into a source of the highest poetical and religious inspiration. The thyrsus,[1] originally a symbol of the insidious power of wine, was transformed into

[1] A spear, whose point was concealed by vine leaves—the "hidden point," of which Catullus speaks, symbolising the treacherous qualities of fermented liquor

a magic wand, filling those whom it touched with a sort of divine frenzy.

The graver deities of Olympus at first looked askance on the riotous young god, treating him as an alien and interloper. For some time his worship was confined to the rural districts, and he was excluded from the solemn temples of great cities. But heathen religion is eminently tolerant and elastic, and by degrees the wild god of wine was admitted into that high fellowship. No longer restricted to the rude homage of drunken clowns, he is seen taking an honoured seat among the hierarchy of Olympus, enthroned by the side of Demeter and Apollo. With Demeter[1] especially he becomes united by a tie of peculiar closeness. Bread and wine are the most primitive forms of human nourishment; and bread and wine, to which revealed religion has given so awful a significance, were already associated in the higher forms of paganism, as typifying the mysterious bond which connects the material and spiritual nature of man. Between Bacchus and Apollo there was also an intimate connection. Apollo was God of the Sun; and Bacchus was a child of fire, born amid the fierce blaze of lightning—an offshoot of that power, at once beneficent and terrible, which fills the world with light and life. Apollo was also the great harper, who led the songs of the Muses when they sang before the throne of Zeus, and the chief

[1] Goddess of Agriculture.

patron of poets; and the laurel of Apollo, the symbol of fame, is always associated with the ivy, the sacred plant of Bacchus.[1]

Such was the god, stripped of his grosser attributes, purified and transfigured, who presided on those great occasions when the elect spirits of Hellas were assembled in Athens, in the theatre named of Dionysus,[2] to listen to the lofty accents of the Tragic Muse.

We have now briefly to trace the process by which Tragedy was developed out of the dithyrambic chorus. At an early period it became customary to vary the lyrical part of the performance by introducing a speech, or *recitative*, pronounced by the leader of the chorus in the intervals of singing. The subject of this speech was at first confined to the adventures of Bacchus; then the field was widened, and other myths were admitted. A most important step in advance was made by the addition of another speaker, called the *Hypokrites*, or actor,[3] who carried on a conversation with the leader of the chorus. By this time the two essential elements of Greek tragedy—the chorus, sung in the intervals of the action, and the dramatic dialogue—were complete, and many of the earlier plays of Æschylus were composed, chiefly or entirely, in this primitive

[1] "Yet once more, O ye *laurels*, and once more,
Ye *myrtles* brown, and *ivy* never sere," etc.
MILTON, "Lycidas."

[2] Another name of Bacchus.

[3] Literally "Answerer."

form. A second actor was introduced by Æschylus; Sophocles added a third; and this number was never exceeded, though any number of "dumb performers," as they were called, might appear on the stage to increase the spectacular effect.

The father of Greek Tragedy was Thespis, an Athenian, and contemporary of Solon. It was he who introduced the first actor, and he also invented the mask, which enabled the same performer to appear in different parts. He was followed by Phrynichus (flourished after 511 B.C.), who was famous for the grace and sweetness of his choric songs; then came, in rapid succession, Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, of whom we shall speak more particularly further on.

The great annual performance of tragedies at Athens took place at the Spring Feast of Dionysus, in the months of March and April. The scene was the theatre of Dionysus, built on the southern slope of the precipitous hill on whose summit stood the Acropolis. A brief description will show the general character of a Greek theatre. It consisted of three parts—the *theatron*, or part occupied by the spectators, which was semicircular in form, hewn out of the solid rock, the seats ascending, tier above tier, up the side of the hill; the stage, for the actors; and the orchestra, or dancing-place, with the altar of Dionysus in the middle, round which the chorus moved with slow and measured steps as they chanted their song. The whole was

open to the sky, and both actors and audience were exposed to the fierce rays of the southern sun, and occasional showers of rain, happily rare in that climate. The acting began in the morning, and tragedy succeeded tragedy all day long. Defended from the weather by broad-brimmed hats, and, doubtless, provided with some form of refreshment, the vast crowd sat patiently on from morning till evening, while the grand procession of their national legends moved slowly in solemn pageant before them. If a play was dull they whiled away the time by munching sweetmeats, and the duller the play the more sweetmeats they consumed.[1] Those who have witnessed the performance of the great *Passion Play* at Oberammergau are in a position to form a fair idea of the external conditions in which a Greek tragedy was produced; and there is a still closer parallel in the profound religious sentiment which in Athens, as in Oberammergau, gathered that great multitude together, and gave depth and significance to the whole moving scene.

The vast size of a Greek theatre had an important influence in determining the character of dramatic representation. The great theatre of Dionysus at Athens had room for thirty thousand spectators, and in the presence of so vast an audience it was necessary to study simplicity, distinctness, and unaffected grandeur. All fine

[1] Our informant here is Aristotle in his "Ethics."

modulation of tone, all the subtle play of feature and gesture, by which a modern actor produces his effects, would have been thrown away on an audience which was counted by tens of thousands. The actors wore masks provided with speaking-tubes, to increase the power of the voice; their figures were padded, to add to their bulk; and their stature was raised by high-heeled boots. Change of scene was rare; all acts of violence and bloodshed were performed behind the stage, and the details were left to be reported by a messenger. Thus the general effect must have been stately, solemn, and statuesque.

Another point to remember is the public, national character of these exhibitions. The management of a theatre was not left to private enterprise, but was a matter which concerned the whole State. The poet who wished to bring a play on the stage submitted his work to the magistrates, and after their approval was obtained, all the cost of representation was defrayed from the public purse, or, to speak more exactly, from the pockets of the richer citizens, on whom, in that happy age, the whole burden of the State was laid. When the performance was ended, prizes were assigned by judges appointed for this purpose, and the successful poet was publicly crowned.

It remains to give some more particular account of the three great masters of Attic Tragedy. Æschylus, the eldest, and in native genius the greatest,

was born in the year 525 B.C. He fought at Marathon, Salamis, and Platæa. His dramatic career begins in 500 B.C., when he was twenty-five years of age. In 477 B.C. he visited the Court of Hiero, Tyrant of Syracuse. The details of his later life are obscure, but common rumour assigns to him a leading part in the opposition to the far-reaching innovations of the democratic leaders at Athens. He returned to Sicily in his old age, and died at Gela in 456 B.C.

Such are the meagre facts which can be asserted with any degree of confidence regarding the most powerful and original of the Athenian dramatists. It was Æschylus who first rescued the drama from its rude and rustic simplicity, and gave it that dignity, sublimity, and power which few of his successors have equalled, and none surpassed. In the earliest of his extant plays, the *Supplices*, the lyrical element predominates, and the dramatic dialogue is comparatively slight and unimportant. In the *Persæ*, some twelve years later, there is a marked gain in the command of dramatic resources; and further progress is seen in the *Seven against Thebes*, which followed five years later. But the great masterpiece of Æschylus is the *Oresteia*, a series of three plays[1] on the tragic fortunes of the House of Pelops. The *Oresteia* may be considered as one great drama in

[1] *Agamemnon*, *Chœphoroi* (*Orestes*, Part I.), *Eumenides* (*Orestes*, Part II.)

three parts, the first of which deals with the crime, the second with the revenge, and the third with the reconciliation. The character of Clytæmnestra has never been surpassed in the whole range of tragic literature; that of Cassandra has never been approached; and the Eumenides are another unique creation, unparalleled in the history of the drama.

A few words must be added on that astonishing production, the *Prometheus*. The date of this play is uncertain; and a still deeper obscurity rests on the inward significance of the great lyrical drama. Much learning and ingenuity have been expended on this obscure subject; but one problem remains unsolved: How was it that the pious and orthodox Æschylus exhibited the supreme ruler of the universe—whom he approaches elsewhere with such awe and reverence, hardly daring to utter his name—in the character of an arbitrary and vindictive tyrant? For such, beyond doubt, is the impression produced by the conduct of Zeus, the young sovereign of heaven. In dealing with this question we have to remember that in the time of Æschylus theology was still in a plastic state, which lent itself easily to the moulding influence o every fresh thinker. One of the chief tasks of an ancient Greek poet was to classify and co-ordinate the vast mass of mythological tradition,[1] and present it in

[1] Numerous illustrations of this fact are found in Pindar, a contemporary of Æschylus, and a poet of kindred genius.

a form which would meet the growing spiritual needs of his contemporaries. And it may be that this play represents a stage in the "higher criticism" of pagan antiquity: Æschylus sought, perhaps, to teach the truth that the religion of fear comes before the religion of love, that the reign of wisdom and goodness is preceded by the reign of power. Moreover, the bold words of rebellion against the ruler of Olympus, in which the play abounds, are always placed in the mouth of Prometheus, who may be regarded as a sort of divine incarnation of the reasoning faculty in man; and he is severely rebuked for his impiety by the Ocean Nymphs, who represent the element of unquestioning faith. Here we have the plain lesson that reason, unguided and unchastened, makes man a rebel against God, and faith leads him back, like a little child, into the paths of obedience and peace.

About a mile from Athens, on the banks of the Cephissus, lay the little village of Colonus. It was a holy place, with cool retreats, shaded by the laurel, the olive, and the vine, "where the Attic bird[1] trills her thick-warbled notes the summer long." Here, in the year 497 B.C., seven years before the battle of Marathon, Sophocles, the darling of the Tragic Muse, first saw the light. Conspicuous for his personal beauty, he was chosen, at the age of seventeen, to lead the dance of youths

[1] The nightingale.

which celebrated the victory of Salamis. From that time onward his life, extending to more than ninety years, was one long series of triumphs and honours. He took an active part in public life, and served under Pericles on the occasion of the revolt of Samos (440 B.C.). He died in 406 B.C., just in time to avoid witnessing the humiliation of his beloved city; and after his death he was canonised by his admiring fellow-citizens, and worshipped as a hero with prayer and sacrifice.

Sophocles, though he falls short of the plenary inspiration of Æschylus, is the most finished master of Attic Tragedy. In his plays all the elements of tragic art are moulded into perfect harmony; and Aristotle selects the *Œdipus Tyrannus* as the typical masterpiece of that species of composition. In Æschylus we are sometimes offended by crudities of form and asperities of manner, which show that the workman was not always master of his instrument; in Euripides we have constantly to fix our eyes on particular beauties, and ignore the faults which belong to a period of decline; but in Sophocles we attain the perfect balance, the severe subordination of part to whole, which marks the apex of Hellenic art. He is the highest example in literature of that energy in repose which is pointed out by Aristotle as characteristic of the divine nature.

Common tradition places the birth of Euripides in the year 480 B.C., the date of the battle of

Salamis; and according to that account it was on that island, to which the Athenians had removed their families after the second burning of Athens, that the last of the great tragic poets of Greece was born. The calumnies of the comic poets, who pursued him with relentless hostility all his life, describe him as the son of a woman who kept a cabbage stall in the market-place of Athens; but, whatever his origin, he received a good education, and was early associated with the leading spirits of his time—with Anaxagoras, one of the first martyrs of science; with the leading Sophists; and above all with Socrates. The date at which he began his dramatic career is uncertain; but he became a copious and diligent writer of tragedy, and nineteen of his plays, besides a large volume of fragments, have been preserved. He died at the Court of Archelaus, King of Macedon, B.C. 406.

Euripides laboured under many disadvantages, which prevented him from reaping those rewards which his rich and brilliant gifts undoubtedly deserved. During his life he was overshadowed by the gigantic fame of Æschylus and Sophocles. His intimacy with such men as Anaxagoras and Socrates, however much it conduced to his mental development, injured him in the public estimation by associating him in the charge of atheism, which, most unjustly, was brought against those eminent men. Year after year he was exposed to the savage attacks of Aristophanes, who hated him as

the chief representative of the new school of thought, which that great master of comedy abhorred and despised. Nevertheless, though he won the prize for tragedy only four times, Euripides must have enjoyed a wide popularity of another kind; his dramas were sung and recited in private circles; and, out of thirty-three tragedies which survive as specimens of the golden age of the Attic theatre, nineteen belong to Euripides.

It was not without reason that Aristophanes made the plays of Euripides the object of his searching and pungent criticism. Their faults are many and obvious. There is a prevailing tone of morbid sentimentalism, very different from the noble sadness of a Sophocles, an Æschylus, or a Pindar when they pause to meditate on the strange, dark problem of human fate. The construction is sometimes stiff and mechanical: the story, instead of unfolding itself by natural degrees in the action, being set forth at length in a formal prologue, cutting the very nerves out of the play before it begins. Many of the speeches have a pedantic, declamatory tone, savouring rather of the lecture-room than of the tragic stage, and other passages are in a quibbling, sophistical vein, caught from the practice of the Athenian law courts. Above all, we miss the high moral grandeur of Æschylus and Sophocles when those great spirits render their homage to the mystery of divine law.

Nevertheless, the works of Euripides are full of

rich and varied excellence. We feel, indeed, that we have descended from the heroic altitude of his great rivals; but if the platform is lower, it is also wider, and leaves more room for the varied play of common human emotion and interest. Familiar types of character are handled with great skill and much subtlety of analysis; our ear is charmed by lyric strains full of melody and sweetness; and the pathos, if somewhat soft and enervating, is at any-rate pitched in a key which comes home to the general heart of humanity. Lastly, Euripides was a consummate master of that Attic idiom which is the most perfect instrument of thought ever devised by the wit of man.

None but a narrow and prejudiced critic can refuse his tribute of reverence to a poet of so many gifts, who, by broadening the basis of his art, unconsciously prepared the way for the splendid triumphs of the Elizabethan Drama.

Since writing the foregoing, the author has found that his interpretation of the *Prometheus* is almost identical with that given by Professor Campbell in his recent work on *Greek Tragedy*.

STORIES FROM GREEK TRAGEDY

Stories from Æschylus

I.—PROMETHEUS

"To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory."

SHELLEY.

I

AT the time when our story begins, Zeus is the lord and tyrant of heaven, and the interest of the drama lies in the conflict of will between the new monarch of gods and men and Prometheus, who may be described as the divine incarnation of the principle of reason. But in order to understand the scenes which follow, it is necessary to carry our thoughts backward for a moment into the dim spaces of the past, and take a brief survey of those elder dynasties, who, long before Zeus saw the light, held sway over creation in the first dawn of time.

First among these was Uranus, who by his marriage with Gæa became the father of three monstrous sons—Briareos, Gyes, and Cottos, creatures of vast size and strength, each of whom had a hundred arms and fifty heads. After these were born to him the Cyclopes, Arges, Steropes, and Brontes—gigantic brethren, each with one eye in the centre of his forehead. All of these were imprisoned by their father in Tartarus, a black, unfathomable pit, as far beneath the earth's surface as earth is from heaven. Then Gæa bore to Uranus thirteen children more—six sons and seven daughters; and the youngest of these sons, who were called Titans, was Cronos.

Now, Gæa was wroth at the imprisonment of her elder children, so she persuaded the Titans to fall upon their father Uranus, and gave Cronos a sickle of adamant[1] for a weapon; and he with his brethren made war on Uranus, who received a wound from the hand of his youngest son; and from the drops of his blood which fell into the sea were born the Furies, awful goddesses with fiery eyes and snaky hair, whose office it is to take vengeance on those who sin against their own kindred. Thus Uranus was conquered and dethroned, and Cronos, his son, reigned in his stead.

Cronos had been warned by an oracle that he was destined to become the father of a son by whom he in his turn should be deprived of his

[1] A fabulous metal of infinite hardness.

sceptre. Thinking to avert his doom, he swallowed all his children as fast as they were born. But when the time drew near for the fulfilment of the prophecy, his wife Rhea hid herself away in a cavern in Crete; and there Zeus was born, and grew up to matchless beauty and force. When he had attained his full growth, he made war upon Cronos, and, after a long struggle, defeated him, and shut him up with the other Titans in Tartarus, appointing the hundred-handed giants to be the warders of their prison.

Such, in very brief outline, is the rude and savage myth from which Æschylus drew the materials for his great tragedy. It has been touched upon to enable you the better to appreciate the skill of the poet, who from the shapeless ore of popular legend has wrought figures of infinite grandeur and beauty.

Among the younger generation of gods was Prometheus, son of Iapetus, one of the Titans. In the struggle between Zeus and Cronos, Prometheus sided with the former, and, advised by him, Zeus was enabled to gain the mastery over Cronos and his brethren—"not by force, but by craft,"—such was the counsel which Prometheus whispered repeatedly in the ear of Zeus. It was the dawn of a new era in the universe, the beginning of the dominion of mind over matter. And Zeus hearkened to his words, and, following his counsel, won the day.

But the young god had only half learnt his lesson, and no sooner was he seated on his throne than he began to show the temper of a tyrant. Having set in order his kingdom, and assigned to the inferior deities their powers and privileges, he turned his eyes earthward, and surveyed the new race of men which had sprung into being amidst all this tumult and conflict of the heavenly powers.

All trace of the late conflict had been swept away; the brute progeny of Uranus was hidden deep down in sunless caverns of earth; land and sea were touched with new loveliness, like the face of a child at the first dawn of the soul; and Nature responded to the gaze of Zeus with a smile of peace and beauty and promise. But as he gazed, he was filled with wonder and wrath, for in all the wondrous picture there was one foul blot—and that was man. Wretched, indeed, he seemed, and wretched seemed his life, sunk in misery, without promise, without hope. And Zeus lifted up his hands, and swore a great oath, vowing that he would cut off the whole of that vile race, and plant another, worthier to live under the bright eye of day.

But Prometheus belonged to an elder line of gods, and had been schooled in the deep wisdom of ancient days. He, too, looked down upon the new inhabitants of earth, but looked with purer and wiser eyes. Where Zeus saw nothing but degradation, he discerned the dark beginnings of

great powers and a mighty future. Above all, his noble heart was filled with pity for man's present state. "Poor souls," he cried, "they perish in their ignorance; for having eyes they see not, and hearing they do not hear. But I will take away the darkness from their eyes, and open their ears to Wisdom's voice, and they shall be saved." Then he took a hollow reed, and stored in it the mysterious seed of fire, and went on his way to the dwellings of men.

Strange dwellings indeed they were! Man, the future lord of creation, then dwelt in damp and gloomy caves, and was feebler and more miserable than the beasts of the field. The brutes have their own powers and faculties, which they understand and exercise within the limits assigned to them; such happiness as a brute can know is theirs; and they look no further. But man even in this dark and degraded state was always tormented by a strange, dull burning within his soul, the mutiny and blind striving of undeveloped powers. Worse than that, he lived in constant fear of a cruel and violent death from the claws of savage beasts, or the fury of the elements.

Such was the life of men when Prometheus went forth on his errand of mercy. His first task was to turn away their thoughts from their fallen and unhappy state. He taught them to look outward and look upward, and soon a ray of heavenly hope broke in upon their darkened souls. Then he showed

them the wonderful gift which he had brought from heaven in the hollow reed—the gift of fire, mother of all arts, and source of all material blessing and comfort to men. When they had learnt its use, he revealed to them the treasures hidden in the bosom of earth—gold and silver and iron, and taught them to make weapons and tools and vessels for daily use. Forthwith they began to till the ground, and build houses, and make ships, in which, timidly at first, with fearful and quaking hearts, they began to brave the unknown terrors of the sea. Then all the wild and fierce creatures which roam in forest, mountain, and plain, first learnt to quail before the eyes of man; for they saw a new meaning in that glance, and shrank from the presence of a power beyond their knowing. Some, less savage, were brought under man's dominion, and became partners of his life and sharers of his toils; the rest shunned the places of his dwelling, and fled into remoter depths of the wilderness.

Side by side with these great gifts came others still more momentous and far-reaching in their consequences. For he taught men to lift up their eyes to the heavens, and trace the courses of the sun, the moon, and the stars; and thence they learnt, along with other lessons of deeper import, to divide the year into days and months and seasons. He taught them the use of number, and gave them an alphabet, by which they were able to leave a written record of their thoughts, their

emotions, and their actions, so that past and present are bound together in a mysterious chain, and all mankind becomes as one soul. And he culled herbs of healing virtue, and showed them how to cure all diseases.

Wider and wider grew the range of man's thought, higher and higher rose the flight of his aspiring spirit. Braced in body and brain by noble labour, trained in habits of order, he had subdued Nature to his will, and surrounded his life with comfort and blessing. Yet one thing was still wanting, and in moments of quiet and leisure obstinate questionings made themselves heard in his heart. Having risen so high, he longed to soar still higher, and hold communion with that other world, the world of spirit, which he felt to be hidden behind the material veil presented to his earthly eye. It was the voice of man's higher nature, the cry of the spirit in her need—and here, too, Prometheus found an answer. He opened their eyes to the signs by which the gods declare their purpose in the world of sense—by the flight and the cry of birds, by wayside omens, by the flaming messengers of the nightly heavens,[1] and by the mysterious whisper heard in dreams. Then, too, began the solemn service of daily sacrifice, the meat-offering and drink-offering—a rude and imperfect service, beyond doubt, but prompted by a true instinct, and preparing the way for a better and purer creed.

[1] Meteors.

Meanwhile the new lord of heaven sat apart, and eyed all these changes with a wrathful and jealous eye. He saw his own purpose thwarted, and his plans forestalled, by another power. Man, so late the object of his scorn, had been taught to lift his head, and made a partaker in the privileges of the gods. Who could tell where such a revolt might lead? Was it not to be feared that this strangely gifted creature would learn insolence from prosperity, and rebel against the very majesty of heaven?

Swift are the purposes of Zeus, and like lightning falls his vengeance on the victims of his anger. Close by his throne stood Kratos and Bia,[1] two hideous giants, the ready ministers of his will. He called them, and bade them send Hephæstus, the God of Fire, into his presence. Hephæstus came halting (for he was lame of both feet), and said: "What is thy will?" And Zeus answered, his eyes flaming with rage: "Go, take this friend of man, this Prometheus, and bind him to a rock in the wilds of Scythia.[2] There let him show his loving-kindness to men."

[1] Strength and Force.

[2] The great plain of Northern Asia, with part of Russia. The exact scene of Prometheus' sufferings is not indicated by Æschylus; but I have followed the common legend, and laid the scene in the Caucasus.

III

The sun is rising over the wild mountains of Caucasus; beneath a towering crag, facing seaward, four figures are standing, all marked by their stature as more than human. One is of regal port, a Titan, and the son of a Titan; but oh, how fallen, how changed, since the day when he fought by the side of Zeus in the battle which set the new god on the throne of heaven! His mighty limbs are loaded with heavy chains, and he is held fast by the rude hands of Kratos and Bia. Near at hand stands Hephæstus, the divine smith, with the instruments of his art, ready to rivet Prometheus to the rock. But he hesitates to begin, for his heart is full of pity for a brother-god, whose subtle wit and deep wisdom he much admires. His sad reverie is soon broken by the harsh voice of Kratos, who urges him, with savage cries, to perform his office. He dare not delay longer, for the stern eye of Zeus is watching him from afar. Yet still he finds time for a word of sympathy to Prometheus: "Deep-witted son of sage Themis," he says, "unwilling, even as thou art, I shall now pin thee to this inhospitable crag, where thou shalt neither hear the voice nor see the face of mortal, but, grilled by the flaming fire of Helios,[1] thou shalt lose the bloom of thy flesh;

[1] The Sun.

and with gladness shalt thou behold when Night with her starry mantle hides the day, and when Helios in his turn shall disperse the rime of dawn; and ever the burden of thy present pain shall grind thee down, for he who shall release you is not yet born."

Then the strokes of the hammer are heard ringing, with dry and hollow sound, through that desolate mountain gorge, and the startled sea-birds rise screaming from their nests. First the hands of Prometheus are made fast to the rock with bands of iron. Then a great wedge of adamant is driven through his breast and deep into the face of the cliff, and at each powerful stroke of the hammer he feels all the pains of death; but he is a god, and cannot die. An iron girdle secures his waist, and his feet are pinioned by strong metal rings. Groaning in spirit, Hephæstus proceeds, slowly and reluctantly, with his task, interrupting each stroke with broken words of sympathy and sorrow; while Kratos mocks him with cries of ferocious glee, exults in the sight of Prometheus' pain, and hails with savage affection each instrument of torture,—rivet and bolt and wedge,—as if it were a living thing.

At last the work is finished; Hephæstus gathers up his tools, and departs; while Kratos lingers to fling a last taunt at that piercèd spirit: "Thou thoughtest to play Providence[1]—thief and traitor

[1] Prometheus = "He who *provides* (foresees)."

to thine order!—well, show thy providence on thine own behalf, and devise some escape from these thy bonds."

IV

All through the foregoing scene Prometheus has not uttered a word. But now that the ministers of tyranny are gone, he lifts up his voice in a wild appeal to earth and sea and sky:

> "Ye azure heavens, ye breezes swift of wing,
> Ye sources of all streams, and ocean waves'
> Innumerable laughter! Mother earth,
> And chiefly thou, all-seeing orb of day,
> Behold what I, a god, endure from gods!"

This, then, is the end of all his proud designs! Chained like a malefactor, incapable of motion as the rock on which he stands, there he must endure his penance for ten thousand years, scorched by the fierce summer suns, drenched with rain and snow and sleet, numbed by the icy breath of winter—and all for his loving-kindness to men!

What sound is that? The air trembles with the light beating of wings, and a faint smell of the sea is wafted towards him. Prometheus shudders: all the future is black with dread, and he fears that some new form of torture is approaching. But a gentle voice reassures him, and, looking upward,

he sees a winged chariot floating through the air towards him, filled with a troop of lovely Ocean Nymphs. The car pauses and checks its flight, like a living thing, alighting on the platform of rock in front of Prometheus. Then all that gentle band surrounds him, with looks of pity and love, and he learns from their leader that, startled by the sounds of the hammer, they have left the deep ocean cave in which they dwell to come and console him. "See," says the eldest sister, who speaks for the rest, "we were in such haste that we have come to thee unsandalled. Now tell us all thy sorrows, and it may be that we can devise some relief."

For some time Prometheus can utter nothing but wild outcries against the cruelty of Zeus. The maiden gently upbraids him for his impiety. "We know," she says, "that the ways of heaven are hard; but thou art over-bold of speech. Let us hear now what is thy crime." Then Prometheus tells them all the story from the beginning—the war with the Titans, and the victory of Zeus, the threatened destruction of mankind, and how that design was thwarted by himself, and all the benefits which his hands have bestowed on mortals.

The Nereids[1] listen in wonder to the tale. They feel that Prometheus has sinned, yet they cannot tell how. Is there no help, no remedy, no hope?

[1] Sea-goddesses, daughters of Oceanus.

Atlas

V

Prometheus is about to proceed with his story when a new and strange figure arrives on the scene. This is Oceanus, the god of the mighty river which rolls its sleepless tide round the earth,[1] and father of the Nereids. He comes riding through the air on a winged charger, and, without dismounting, addresses Prometheus, assuring him, with many words, of his zeal and friendship. But Prometheus knows with whom he has to deal. Oceanus is a somewhat weak-kneed personage, and, alone among the Titans, remained neutral in the war with Zeus. Accordingly, when the ocean deity plies him with saws of antique wisdom, bidding him to learn humility and yield to the rod, and winds up his sage harangue with a promise to go and intercede with Zeus, Prometheus cuts him short, and hints that he may bring himself into trouble by his interference. "Think," he says, "what has been the fate of all those who have resisted the power of Zeus. Think of my brother Atlas, doomed to groan for ever under the burden of the sky.[2] Think of that mighty son of earth, the hundred-headed, furious Typho, who rose up in revolt against all the gods, breathing out threatenings and slaughter; but there fell upon him the sleepless bolt of Zeus,

[1] The earth was believed to be a circular, slightly convex surface, surrounded by the great "River" Oceanus.

[2] The sky was described as a vast dome, supported on the shoulders of the giant Atlas.

the down-rushing lightning with its fury blast, which struck him down in the midst of his haughty boasting, and, pierced to the very heart, he was burnt to ashes and blasted in his might.[1] Look well to thyself, and leave me to my fate. I would not that any portion of my sufferings should fall upon thee."

Oceanus is visibly alarmed by the hint of danger to himself, but, willing to save his dignity, he still makes a show of his eagerness to serve his friend. Prometheus, who is longing to be rid of him, supplies him with the excuse he requires. "If thou go," he says, "I shall only suffer the more, for Zeus will believe that I have sent thee, and will be provoked to new outrage against me."

Oceanus snatches eagerly at the pretext thus offered, and, borne by his flying steed, is soon safe at home again in his palace beneath the sea.

When this timid friend is gone, Prometheus remains sunk for a long time in silent thought, while the gentle daughters of ocean join their voices in a sweet and solemn chant; for in the days of old both gods and men gave ready utterance to their joys and woes in song, the natural language of the heart. And these are the words which they sang, but the music cannot be set down here:

"We mourn thy awful fate, Prometheus;
Our eyes brim o'er with tears, and all our cheeks are wet,
Indignant swells our heart,
To see the ancient powers of heaven subdued
Beneath the haughty will and lawless sway of Zeus.

[1] Typho is a personification of volcanic forces.

From all the land there comes a moaning cry
For ancient majesty, and glory passed away
From thee, Prometheus, and thy kin.
And all who dwell in Asia's holy seat,
The mortal neighbours of thy grief,
Groan with thy groans, and suffer with thy pain.

Maidens of the land of Colchis,[1]
Warrior maidens, stout of heart,
All the host of Scythia, dwelling
Round the distant Lake Mæotis,[2]
All Arabia's valiant sons,
Join in a loud and lamentable cry for thee.

For thee the solemn cadence of the sea
Sorrowful swells and sinks;
From earth's unsunned, abysmal caverns rise
Murmurs and throes of pain;
And every river's stainless fountain-head
Sends back the voice of woe."

VI

The last notes of the song have died away, and the maidens stand gazing with awe and pity on the noble features of Prometheus, now marred by cruel agony. Their tears fall fast as they look on the tortured god, and low murmurs of sorrowful sympathy are heard among them. Long he remains motionless and silent, lost in a bitter reverie; at last a deep sobbing sigh shakes his mighty frame, and he speaks. "Think not," he says, "that

[1] At the eastern extremity of the Black Sea; the Amazons are meant.
[2] The Sea of Azov.

pride or stubbornness has locked my lips. I was struck dumb by the burden of brooding thought and the memory of benefits forgot. I set a new king on the throne of heaven, and he rewards me with these bonds. What was my sin?—that I saved mankind from his destroying hand."

Then he tells anew the story, which we have heard already, of his services to men, and how he raised them from something lower than the brutes to something little less than gods. The Nereids listen with delight and wonder, and when the tale is done, urge him to use his mighty powers on his own behalf. "Once rid of these chains," they say, "thou mayest one day be more powerful than Zeus himself."

But Prometheus knows that the way of salvation lies elsewhere. Beyond the sway of Zeus, and all the motley host of heaven who hold authority under him, are dark, primeval forces—the dread Erinyes,[1] and the sister Fates, who hold the universe in their gigantic grasp, and move the whole machine at their will. Prometheus has drunk of the deep fountain of ancient wisdom; in his heart of hearts he knows that he has sinned, and must tread the dark path of suffering until his penance is complete. And he hints at a great secret to which he alone holds the key, by which he will one day be able to buy his release from Zeus. The maidens long to hear this wonderful secret, but the time has not

[1] Personifications of the Moral Law.

yet come to reveal it. Prometheus holds it as a rod over the head of his oppressor, and he must not throw that rod away.

Again the martyred god is silent, and his gentle friends stand musing a while on all they have heard. In their first song they have used bold words of defiance towards Zeus; but now they seem to repent of their rashness, and make amends in this pure and pious psalm:

"Never may Zeus, the lord of all, set his power against my will, and may I not be slow in drawing near to the gods at their holy feasts, by the unquenchable flood of my sire, Oceanus; and may I not be a transgressor in words, but may this law abide with me, and never melt from my remembrance.

"A sweet thing it is to draw out one's life to length of days, nourishing the spirit in the glad, bright flame of joy; but I shudder to behold thee by a thousand tortures rent and torn. For because thou tremblest not before Zeus, in thy self-willed temper, thou honourest mortals over-much, Prometheus.

"See, how thankless a service is this, O my friend; say, where is there any to help thee? And hast thou not discerned how faint, how weak, how like a dream, is the life to which the blind race of mortals is bound? Never shall mortal counsels overstep the divine order of Zeus. This have I learnt by looking on thine awful doom, Prometheus.

"Ah! how different is this song which now leaps wingèd to my lips, from that other which I sung

to grace thy nuptial hour, when thou didst lead home a lady of thine own kin, having won her with marriage gifts to be thy consort and thy bride."

VII

Another long pause ensues, and when Prometheus breaks silence again, his language is higher and his spirit bolder than ever. And now he discloses part of the secret on which depends his hope of delivery. "The day shall come," he says, "when the haughty heart of Zeus shall be humbled, and the curse of Cronos, which he uttered when he was cast down from his ancient throne, be fulfilled. For he is preparing to enter on a marriage, from which shall spring a son, who shall discover a weapon mightier than the flaming bolt of Zeus—mightier than the dread trident of Poseidon, wherewith he shakes the earth; and I alone am master of the means whereby he may yet shun this fate."

The Nereids are shocked by his wild and reckless tone, and urge him again to submit. He answers with scorn, and defies Zeus to do his worst. "Let him enjoy his power while he can," says the fierce rebel; "his reign shall not be long."

The challenge is soon answered. The loud boast of Prometheus has reached the ear of Zeus, and he sends Hermes, his messenger, with a last stern appeal.

Hermes shows all the insolence of an underling. "Thou railer," he says, "bitter of heart and bitter of tongue, thou thief and traitor to heaven, Zeus bids thee tell the secret of this marriage whereof thou speakest; and see that thou answer not in riddles, but tell all thou knowest from beginning to end. Compel me not a second time upon this errand."

"Well mouthed indeed," answers Prometheus; "well mouthed, young lackey of an upstart lord! Fearless ye dwell in heaven's high citadel, and dream not of a fall. Yet have I seen two monarchs overthrown, and the third shall follow, in ruin deep and dire. 'Tis a gentle and submissive answer—how sayest thou? Now get thee gone whence thou camest; from me thou shalt learn no more."

A lively war of words follows, from which Hermes at length desists, borne down by the fierce mockery of Prometheus. Then the herald of the gods turns to go, but before leaving Prometheus to his fate, he tells him of all the tortures prepared for him if he persists in his stubbornness. The rock on which he stands shall be torn from the mountain-side, and he shall be hurled, rock and all, into the bottomless pit. After many days he shall be brought back to light; and then he shall have a companion in his captivity—"the winged hound of Zeus, the tawny eagle, a guest uninvited, who sits all day at table"; who shall fasten on his breast, and tear his heart, with hunger unappeased,

the flesh ever growing anew, only to be devoured again.

Hermes lingers still, waiting for some sign of submission; and once more the maidens implore Prometheus to yield.

But threats only harden that proud rebel heart. Standing now on the very brink of ruin he hurls defiance to the throne of Zeus. "Though the whole heaven quake with thunder," he cries in this extremity, "and flame with lightning from pole to pole; though earth be torn from her foundations, and ocean heave his billows to the stars and quench their light; yea, though I be hurled to the bottomless abyss, yet will I never yield."

Then Hermes, finding his exhortations useless, returns to Olympus, after a word of warning to the Nereids not to remain longer, lest they should share Prometheus' doom. But they scorn his cautious counsels, and stand by to see the end.

They have not long to wait. Soon the earth begins to rock beneath their feet, and they hear the bellowing of subterranean thunder; the heavens are aflame with lightning, and a whirlwind scatters the dust in eddying reels; for all the blasts of heaven are at war, and sea and sky are mingled together. Then the ground is rent asunder, and, with one last wild appeal to earth and heaven, Prometheus vanishes with his rock, down, down, into that black, yawning pit.

EPILOGUE[1]

We must now take one bold leap across a vast gulf of years, and once more visit the spot where the Titan's long agony began. The words of Hermes have been fulfilled: there stands the rock in its place, and there hangs Prometheus, close pinioned as when we saw him last. The long day is waning, and as the red sun begins to dip into the western sea a vast eagle takes wing, and leaves the rock, where he has sat all day, and feasted on that immortal flesh. Already the hideous wound begins to close, and by to-morrow it will be completely healed, and a new banquet will be ready for that fierce guest.

The eyes of Prometheus are closed, and his head droops wearily, for he is exhausted by the long torture which is his daily portion. But suddenly a mighty voice sounds in his ears, and looking up he perceives one like unto the gods in form and stature, who stands gazing on him with glances of warm sympathy and love. A new light kindles in the face of Prometheus; the mists of pain clear away from his eyes, and he murmurs: "At last! 'Tis he, my deliverer; by these sure signs I know him—by his club, his lion-skin, and his bow."

Prometheus is not deceived: the debt of vengeance is paid at last, and the hour of his release

[1] This slight sketch was put together from the fragments of the "Prometheus Unbound" of Æschylus, with some hints from Pindar, as it was thought proper to give some account of the sequel to the great mythological drama.

is at hand. All night long the young Hercules remains sitting at his feet, while the great seer unfolds to him the course of his future wanderings. With the first gleam of dawn the eagle is seen hovering near; but a moment after he lies lifeless before them, pierced by an arrow from the bow of Hercules.

From a far distant mountain peak Hermes has marked the monster's fall. Swift as a sunbeam he follows the signal, and alights on the cliff where Prometheus still hangs in fetters. "The secret! Quick! The secret!" he cries. "Thine hour is come!" Then Prometheus opens his mouth and reveals the secret which he has guarded so long: Zeus is about to take the sea-nymph Thetis to wife; and if he does so she will bear a son who shall be mightier than his sire, and cast him down from his throne. The words are no sooner spoken than Hermes touches the bands of Prometheus with his magic wand: instantly rivet and shackle and wedge crumble into dust, and the Titan stands, healed and whole, in all his former majesty and beauty. "Now, come," says Hermes, "and I will guide thee to the happy abode, far away in the west, where Cronos and thy brethren dwell in everlasting bliss. There remains one vacant seat, and it has long been waiting for thee."

And the sun shone brighter, and earth, sea, and sky joined all their voices in multitudinous music, to herald in the new reign of peace and love

II.—THE HOUSE OF PELOPS

I. AGAMEMNON

"Naught among mortals can endure forever;
Well spake the Chian bard that men like leaves
Perish and pass away; but few endeavour
To lay to heart the truth their ear receives.

. . . . . .

But thou remember this, and to life's goal
Draw from the good to satisfy thy soul."

P. S. WORSLEY, from SIMONIDES.

I

WE are standing before the castle of Mycenæ, the ancient palace of the kings of Argos. It is a fair and stately building, and its master is the mightiest and wealthiest prince in all Greece. But a dark curse rests upon his name, and on all the line of Pelops, the founder of their race. From the hour when Pelops, a young exile from Lydia, came to Greece, and won his bride by treachery, every step in the history of his descendants has been stained with blood, and their annals are dark with family feud and household crime.

Atreus, the father of Agamemnon, had been injured by his brother Thyestes, and in revenge he

set before Thyestes a feast of his own children's flesh. Thyestes tasted the horrid meal in ignorance, and when he learnt the truth, invoked fearful curses on Atreus and all those of his blood. It would delay us too long to relate the whole story of horror heaped on horror, murder provoked by murder, shame followed by blacker shame. Let it suffice to say that every member of this ill-fated house has added something to the sum of iniquity, until a whole brood of curses have built their nests, like foul birds, in the palace, and hover about it with boding cry. Well may those who remember the past shake their heads and quicken their footsteps, as they pass those proud turrets, for even in the full blaze of noon a black cloud, fraught with tempest and ruin, seems to brood over the gilded battlements.

Agamemnon, the present King of Argos, is far from home, striving with the other chiefs of Greece on the shores of Asia to win back his brother's bride. For the curse of Pelops has followed his descendants in every relation of life—sitting by them at table, and shedding poison in their cup; turning the glad marriage song into jarring discord; mocking them like a fiend in the last sad hour of death.

Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus married two sisters, Clytæmnestra and Helen, daughters of Tyndareus, and by a solemn oath the father of the brides bound the princes who were present

Iphigeneia

By permission of the B.P.C., London

as guests at the marriage feast, to avenge any wrong which was offered to his daughters. So when Helen, the wife of Menelaus, fled from her home at Sparta with Paris, a prince of Troy, Agamemnon summoned all who had taken that oath to fulfil their pledge and make war with him on Priam, King of Troy, and father of Paris.

A thousand ships assembled at Aulis, in the narrow strait between Eubœa and the mainland of Greece, and lay there waiting for a favourable wind. But the days went by, lengthening into weeks, and still the winds were contrary. All hearts were growing weary, when a strange portent appeared, full of dark meaning. On a lofty rock, in sight of the whole host of Greeks, two eagles were seen, feasting on the body of a hare with her unborn young. What did the horrid banquet mean? Was it not a reminder sent by Artemis, the pure goddess who loves all young and tender things, to warn the princes, in their power and pride, that the curse of their house was still alive? The great King of Mycenæ shuddered as he gazed, and seemed to hear the yell of a fiend sitting by his own hearthstone, far away at his home in Argos.

Not in vain was the warning sent. For months the fleet lay idle, waiting for a fair wind. Stores were exhausted, and thousands sat fasting and weary by their camp fires. Then loud murmurs began to rise against the brother chieftains who

had brought that great army there to starve. At last Calchas, the priest and prophet of the Grecian host, gave clear utterance to the general complaint, and went about the camp crying that the gods were wroth and claimed a sacrifice. "They will have blood,"—so ran the awful message—"the blood of a stainless maid, else must we remain here and perish."

"The blood of a stainless maid!" The words reached Agamemnon's ears, and fell upon them like the voice of doom. He wrung his hands in agony, and muttered: "The curse! The curse! My daughter, O my daughter, pride of my home, light of mine eyes! They will take thy life, Iphigeneia, my own heart's darling!" Long he resisted, vowing that all should perish rather than that a hair of her head should suffer harm. But when the army rose in open mutiny, and all the princes thronged round him with fierce looks, crying for blood, he gave way to the storm, bowed his head, and whispered: "Let it be done."

Bound hand and foot, her cries stifled by a gag, Iphigeneia was brought to the place of sacrifice, and laid upon the altar by the hands of those stern warrior chiefs. There she lay, robed as a princess, her eyes beseeching pity of her butchers. Will no heart melt, no hand be raised, in answer to that mute appeal? Will none remember the day when he sat as a guest in her father's hall, and took the cup from her hands, and listened to the thrilling

tones of her voice as she sang the sacred hymn to Zeus? No, not one; fanatic fear has turned all hearts to stone. Only her father veils his face, that he may not see the death of his child. At length the blow falls, the pure spirit departs, and Calchas has had his will.

II

Ten years have passed away since Agamemnon and his host set sail for Troy. The chieftains had been warned by signs and wonders that Troy should fall in the tenth year; and before his departure Agamemnon had promised to send a message by means of a line of beacon fires, to inform his wife at Mycenæ when the city was taken. So all through the last year of the siege a sentinel has been stationed every night on the loftiest tower of the palace to watch for the flaming signal of victory.

There he stands, crouched like a faithful house-dog at his post, that ancient retainer of the house of Pelops. A whole year he has been kept at this nightly service, and he has grown weary with long waiting. Night after night he has paced the battlements, until he has become skilled in the lore of the starry heavens, and grown familiar with those "bright potentates, conspicuous in the sky," by whose courses men mark the seasons of the rolling year. Sometimes he nods, overcome with sleep,

there on his stony couch amidst the dews; but fear stands at his side, forbidding slumber, and he starts from his crouching attitude, and paces to and fro. Now he breaks into a low chant, or whistles a note or two from some old tune; then a troubled look comes over his face, and his eyes fill with tears. He knows all the sad history of his master's house, and all that has passed there in the last ten years. The Queen has forgotten her duty to her lord; Ægisthus, the King's cousin, now sits in Agamemnon's seat; and the old man's heart is heavy with foreboding.

"Only let my King return, and even now all may be well; therefore shine out, bright messenger of the night, and end my weary watch!" The eyes of the watchman are fixed on a lonely peak, which stands like a sentinel on the northern horizon, in full sight of Agamemnon's palace. Suddenly a tongue of flame leaps up from the summit of that rocky hill, and, when all the neighbouring heights repeat the message, the old man raises a joyful cry: "Arise, arise, wife of Agamemnon! Quit thy couch, and raise a song of triumph! Troy has fallen! The beacon blazes on the hill!"

In a moment all is noise and bustle in the palace, torches flame in every chamber, and lamps, fed with the King's costliest oil, blaze back an answer to that joyful signal. Messengers hurry through the town bearing orders from the Queen, and soon fires are leaping on every altar, and choice victims

stand ready for the sacrifice. The citizens are thronging to the temples to offer prayer and praise, and a select company of elders winds slowly up the hill to greet the Queen in this hour of joy and gladness.

They find her standing at the gate, ready to receive their homage. Night is waning, and the first pale gleam of dawn sheds a ghostly light on her tall form and queenly countenance. But there is a fierce gleam of delight in her eyes, and her words are full of wild exultation.

The elders are perplexed. They have heard the order from the palace to hold a public thanksgiving for some great success, and come, as in duty bound, in obedience to the Queen's summons, but they are still in the dark as to the cause.

"I read doubt and misgiving on your faces, nobles of Argos," says the Queen; "but the hour for doubt and misgiving is past: Troy is in the hands of the Greeks." "How sayest thou, daughter of Tyndareus?" answers an aged chieftain, whose son has fallen under the walls of Ilium. "Troy fallen! Where is thy proof? Is this one of thy dreams, or has some idle rumour beguiled thee?"

"Fie on thy dreams and rumours!" cries Clytæmnestra; "Hephæstus[1] sent the tidings by a line of courier fires. From peak to peak, from island to island, sprang the flaming messenger,

[1] God of Fire.

until it alighted on the roof of this palace where I dwell. First on Ida's lofty steep was kindled a beacon; then the hills of Lemnos sent up an answering fire, and sped on the signal to Athos' frowning cliff; from Athos to Eubœa, and across the plain of Asopus, leaped the wingèd torch to the watchers on wild Cithæron; then onward to the hills of Megara, whence it sprang with one bound to the network of hills on our northern borders; and there it flashed on the eyes of my watcher, with bright pledge of labour ended and success achieved. Such is the warrant by which I bid thee cast thy doubts away and rejoice with my joy."

The fiery messenger which started on its race at Mount Ida seems to blaze in the eyes and burn in the words of the Queen. Her imagination carries her in a moment to the mingled scenes of joy and woe now passing at Troy. "Hark to the sounds of discord in her streets," she says, "the voice of triumph, and the voice of anguish; they join, but they can never mix, like vinegar and oil poured into the same vessel. Husband, brother, son—there they lie, cold and stark, torn by the foeman's spear; for those who survive, one last kiss on those frozen lips, one last agonised embrace, and then the yoke of slavery. But for the Greeks, what a change, what a relief, has this night wrought! No more exposure under freezing skies, no more nights of vigil after days of battle,

but full meals, enjoyed at leisure, and deep, deep slumber all night long."

Then her tone changes, and her words become dark and threatening. "Let them beware sacrilege," she adds; "let them not forget their reverence for altar and for holy shrine. The arm of Justice is long, and her grasp is sure; it may reach them on the sea, *it may reach them in their home.* Ay, ay; there is a wound that still bleeds, and a voice that still cries, even in the tomb."

Having uttered these mysterious words, with one glance, full of dark meaning, at the elders, she is gone.

The old men linger, murmuring together in low tones, divided between joy and doubt and anxious care. A great victory has been won; yet who knows if the news be true? Long has Zeus been bending his bow on the transgressor, Paris, and now the shaft has sped, and the debt of vengeance is paid. The heart of the wicked grows hot with guilty pride; he lifts up his foot, and kicks against the altar of justice. But the gods are not blind; they wait their hour, and strike, though after many years, and the whole edifice of his fortune totters and crumbles and falls. Then he sits among the ruins, and strives to utter a prayer, but guilt has sealed his lips. He heaps the altar with sacrifice, but the fire kindled by polluted hands will not burn; his own stubborn spirit seems to have passed into the flame, and it smoulders, and dies.

Such was the crime of Paris, and such bitter fruit has it borne. Generous welcome in the halls of Menelaus he found, and made a foul return. He stole the wife of his host, and carried her away to Troy. There sits the husband by his lonely hearth, with anguish deeper than words. Sometimes he wanders restless through his empty halls, gazing on the image of his beloved in statue and picture; but now that the living presence is passed away, the counterfeit seems hollow, and mocks the hunger of his heart with stony eyes. Phantom forms of surpassing loveliness visit him in dreams, making his heart glow with joy; but when he seeks to clasp the vision in his arms, it flits away down the dim, shadowy paths of sleep.

O fair and false and terrible! Helen, thou hast brought woe to thine own house and mourning to all the land of Hellas. In a thousand homes thou hast made sorrow a perpetual guest. Fathers and mothers and wives sent forth their strongest and their fairest to fight in Helen's cause. Oh, how they longed for the day of return, the bright glance of the eye, the warm clasp of the hand! But instead of these they receive a little urn of bronze, and within it a handful of dust. Ares[1] is a hard dealer, and drives a cruel bargain: he takes the living, and makes sorry payment—a little heap of ashes, which a breath can blow away.

What are the thoughts of those who sit at home

[1] God of War.

and receive this bitter merchandise from beyond the sea? Sorrow must have its way; but anger soon drives out sorrow. "Poor dust!" cries one; "not many days ago this dust was a warrior, skilful and stout." "Fallen in a woman's cause!" mutters another; and a groan of rage answers his words, with muttered threats against the princes who have filled the land with mourning.

There is wrath in store for the children of wrath; they who take the sword shall perish by the sword; the violent man shall come to a violent end. Prosperity rooted in another's misery is a tree rotten at the core, and at the first breath of adversity it shall be overthrown.

Thus the voice of triumph over Agamemnon's victory is marred by notes of suspicion, doubt, fear, and downright hatred. The elders as yet are but half convinced. "Women are ever credulous," they think; "perhaps after all it is only an idle tale. And, even if it be true, what good can come of a victory won at such a price and in such a cause? It may be that this dearly bought success is only a prelude to some ruinous disaster."

III

The hour is at hand for Agamemnon's home-coming, and again the elders are in attendance at the palace, ready to do honour to the conqueror of Troy. From their lofty station they command

a wide view over the surrounding country, and soon a traveller is seen wending his way along the highroad which leads from the sea. As he draws near, they observe by his dress that he is a herald. Then they lose sight of him for a moment, as he enters the precincts of the castle; but soon he appears again, passing through the massive stone gates. His brows are shadowed by an olive wreath, in sign of victory; and his garments, stained with mud and powdered with dust, show that he has travelled far and fast.

"Welcome, dear land of Argos, seen once more after ten long years! Welcome, Zeus, our sovereign lord, and thou, monarch of Pytho,[1] now, I trust, no longer our foe! And hail to thee, Hermes, name dear to heralds; and, all ye heroes who sped us to the land of Troy, receive us now with eyes of kindness on our return." Thus speaking, and bowing low as he pronounces each sacred name, the herald halts before the front of the palace, where the stone effigies of the gods he addresses are glowing rosy-red in the rays of the rising sun. Then he turns to the elders, and bids them prepare to receive their King, who is coming, like a light in the darkness, laden with the spoils of Troy.

Then, in words which jar strangely on a pious ear, he describes the ruin and desolation of the land of Priam. "He hath not done the work negligently," says this faithful servant of Aga-

[1] Apollo, who favoured the Trojans all through the siege.

memnon. "Every altar is overthrown, every temple is made a heap, and not a germ of life is left in the land. Neither Paris nor the city which shared his sin can boast that their crime exceeds the penalty; those haughty towers which sheltered the transgressor have now become his tomb."

After this untimely boast, so offensive to Greek sentiment, the herald goes on to speak of the weary years when they lay encamped before the walls of Troy. "'Twas a ten years' sickness for all of us," he says, "and we were sick with longing for home." "And we," answers an aged Argive, "were sick with longing for you. We too had our cares here at home, grievous and hardly to be borne."

The old man is alluding to the suspicious conduct of Clytæmnestra, of whose intentions towards her husband he has grave doubts. But he is too cautious to explain his meaning further; and the herald, who has a great opinion of himself, is soon carried away again on the tide of his own eloquence, describing the hardships of the ten years' siege. The whole tone and bearing of this long-winded and pompous fellow is carefully modelled on that of Agamemnon, but he has not wit to do more than ape the language and gestures of his lord. When he has finished, Clytæmnestra appears, and after greeting the herald, rallies the elders for their incredulity. "So the beacon has spoken truth," she gaily says, "and the giddy heart of a woman was right for once!" Then, seeing the herald

opening his mouth for another harangue, she interrupts him: "Save thine eloquence, good fellow; I shall hear all thou hast to tell from thy master's own lips. Make haste, and carry my message to him; bid him speed his coming, and satisfy the longing of our hearts. Here shall he find a loyal wife, a faithful house-dog, loving him, and hating his foes; yea, a true housewife, who has broken no seal in all the length of days—blameless and stainless, on whose fair fame slander hath never breathed. For what know I of blame or stain? Bright is mine honour as a blade of steel—of steel that knows no dyeing."[1]

With this hint of her fearful purpose, veiled in riddling words, the Queen retires, and the herald, in answer to an inquiry from the elders, proceeds to describe a terrible storm which scattered the Grecian fleet on its departure from Troy. All night the tempest raged, and, when day broke, the ship of Menelaus, which had weighed anchor with the rest, was nowhere to be seen.

The mention of this well-beloved prince carries the thoughts of his hearers back to the day when his faithless wife left her native land in Sparta, and followed Paris, to become an inmate in the stranger's halls. Sorrow she left behind her, and sorrow she

[1] "The dyeing of steel" seems to have been a proverbial phrase to denote something impossible; but there is also a sinister allusion to the sword which she is keeping for Agamemnon, soon to be dyed in his blood.

brought to her second home. Yet how sweet a vision she seemed to the Trojans, when first she appeared among them!—an incarnate spirit of pure delight, a very rose of beauty, transporting the soul with a passion of tenderness. Who dreamed in that hour of gladness that every smile from her lips would cost a hundred lives, that every glance from her eyes meant desolation to a hundred homes?

Truly the mighty ones of earth walk in slippery places, and hard is it for them to keep the straight path. Nevertheless, heaven's pure light shines impartially on high and low, and, whether he be prince or peasant, no man transgresses but by his own free will.

IV

There is a sound of rolling chariot wheels and of voices crying "The King! The King!" The car approaches, rumbles through the arched gateway, and halts before the palace. Immediately the great gates are closed with an ominous clang, shutting out the murmuring crowd, which after a while disperses, and returns to the town.

Two persons are seated in the chariot. One is a man of middle age, whose every look and gesture stamps him as born to high command: it is Agamemnon himself, son of Atreus, conqueror of Troy, and the mightiest prince in Greece. The other is a

young and lovely woman, richly attired, and carrying in her hand the wand of a prophetess. She is deadly pale, and her eyes have the far-off look of one whose thoughts are in another world. This is Cassandra, a Princess of Troy, daughter of Priam, and Priestess of Apollo, now a captive and a slave, doomed to hard bondage in the victor's home. Both remain seated while the elders draw near to render homage to their lord. Their greeting is cold and formal; they will not, they declare, feign a rapture which they do not feel; they are no sycophants, but true friends, who are not afraid to speak their minds, even though their words be displeasing. They did not disguise their disapproval, when the best blood of Greece was poured out in a domestic quarrel. But now they are willing to let the dead bury their dead, and show themselves loyal citizens and faithful servants of the King.

Agamemnon answers in words full of presumption and pride. "My first address," he says, "is to Argos, and the gods who dwell in the land, who share with me the glory of my victory. Where stood the towers of Ilium now ruin dwells? Of all her wealth and glory naught is left but one rich pile—of dust; there Havoc sits enthroned, and snuffs up the savour of that rare sacrifice." Then, his imagination taking fire as he proceeds, he describes the stratagem by which Troy was captured: "As a bird is caught in the fowler's net, so we compassed the city round about; and that good beast of ours,

with his armèd freight,[1] sprang over the wall like a ravening lion, and lapped his fill of royal blood."

After this pompous prelude he deigns to notice the presence of the elders. Far from being offended by their cold and measured speech he approves of their frankness, and adds that he has seen enough of flatterers and false friends in the last ten years. Then he hints at rumours of disaffection in his own realm of Argos: "I shall know how to confirm my friends in their good will to me; and if there be aught amiss, ye will find in me a good physician for the disorders of the state—ready, if need be, with knife and cautery to heal her wounds."

In every accent of Agamemnon we hear the tyrant: there is no remorse for the past, no misgiving for the future.

Meanwhile another listener has joined the audience, unseen as yet by that proud, kingly orator. With noiseless step, silent as the panther's tread, she has stolen in behind him, and stands waiting, with downcast eyes and sly, slow smile, till he has ended. Then she comes forward, and after a deep, fawning obeisance, she stands erect, confronting her lord, and speaks: "Great King, behold thy Queen! And listen, all ye good people, to the confession of a loving, faithful wife. In the long lapse of years modest reserve has been banished from my heart, and I take no shame to publish before you all my story of suffering, and hope long deferred. For ten

[1] The Wooden Horse.

long years all the burden of the State has lain on a woman's frail shoulders. With rebels at home, and ill news coming hourly from abroad, many a time should I have laid violent hands on myself but that friendly force prevented me. Hadst thou received all the wounds on thy body of which I heard report, thou wouldst have been full of holes as a net; and three times thou wast slain, three times have we put on mourning for thee. Thus, hemmed in by dangers and terrors, we dare not in our weakness suffer the young Orestes, sweet pledge of our wedded love, to dwell longer here, so we sent him away to a friendly prince, Strophios of Phocis, where he lives in safety and honour.

"Ah! how have I longed for this hour! Ah! how I have wept, till the gushing fountains of my tears are dry, and not one drop remains! Night after night have I lain watching till the dawn, waiting to hear the cry of my watchman on the tower; and if I fell into a brief, troubled sleep, the thin, shrilling sound of a gnat would break my dreams —dreams full of terror, wounds, and death.

"But now 'tis past, that long and sorrowful penance. Therefore thrice hail, dear lord of my heart—dear as an only child to a widowed mother, welcome as land to storm-beaten mariners, or a running fountain to a thirsty wayfarer."

With all the art of a practised speaker, enforcing her words with gesture and look and tone, now

with broken accents of tenderness, now with a pealing note of sonorous eloquence, the Queen dwells on her theme, like one who lingers over a delicate meal. Her hearers listen with amazement; never before have they heard such words from a woman's lips. While she is still speaking, a rich crimson carpet is brought, and laid down to serve as a pathway from the chariot into the palace. "Let not that royal foot," says Clytæmnestra, "which has trodden on the ashes of Troy, be profaned by common soil. Thou shalt enter thy home by a path of royal purple; while Justice leads the way, and gives thee such welcome as thou hast hardly hoped to find."

Agamemnon is ill at ease: he is confounded by these high-sounding words, and there is something in his wife's look and tone which he does not understand. He reproves her for her extravagant adulation. "Fawn not on me," he says, "as though I were a tyrant of Asia and thou an Eastern slave, and lay not purple tapestries for my feet to tread. Approach me as a man, not as a god; 'tis meet for a mortal to look forward to his end."

Clytæmnestra presses her request, entreating him to alight on the rich carpet. Still he resists, until his wife appeals to his generosity. "'Tis fit," she urges, "that the strong should yield in little things." At this he gives way, and, first ordering one of the slaves to take off his sandals, he descends from the chariot, and his feet rest on that rich purple floor.

Then after a word to his wife, requesting her favour for Cassandra, the captive princess, he passes slowly, with reluctant footsteps, along the carpet, and disappears in the palace, whither he is followed shortly after by his wife. The chariot remains, and Cassandra still keeps her seat, without sound or motion.

V

Ten years have come and gone, ten thousand tides have rolled, since the Grecian keels first grated on the sands of Troy. The aged princes of Argos have seen their King with their own eyes; he is here, crowned with victory, safe under his own roof. And yet, what is this boding shape of terror which hovers ever before their eyes? What is this prophecy of woe, which rises without ceasing, unbidden and unwelcome, from their hearts? Can naught annul the past — naught still the dull throbbing of this inward pain, whose every beat seems to bring them nearer to the fulfilment of some dreadful deed? Some disasters there are which may be remedied: a ship on the point of sinking may be saved by the sacrifice of the cargo; a long term of famine may be stayed by a bountiful harvest. But when once the red life-blood has fallen before a man's feet on the ground, who shall charm it back again, charm he never so wisely? "The will of heaven is dark, and will not suffer me to cry aloud my fear; my spirit groans in its

blindness, unable to see the end, like an old dame striving vainly by the light of a smouldering fire to unravel a tangled skein."

Murmuring in low tones together, with many a fearful glance towards the palace, the venerable counsellors of Argos still linger in the courtyard, held by a strange fascination, dreading they know not what. Their meditations are suddenly cut short by Clytæmnestra, who re-enters hastily, and commands Cassandra to follow her into the inner court, where a solemn sacrifice is preparing in honour of the King's return. But the Trojan princess seems frozen to her seat; neither by word nor look does she intimate that she has heard the haughty summons. "What!—moody?" cries the Queen with anger and scorn. "I counsel thee to learn thy lesson betimes; we have a rod for stubborn spirits. Go, slave, and take thy place among the other slaves!" Still Cassandra remains motionless, without word or sign. "Poor soul!" says one of the bystanders, in pity for her forlorn state. "She has the air of some wild creature caught in the hunter's toils; perchance she understands not the Greek tongue." "Well," answers Clytæmnestra, "I have no time to bandy words with her; we shall find means later to bend her to our will." Saying this she turns away, with a gesture of contempt, and passes again into the palace.

The shadow of a passing bird is thrown for a moment across the sunlit courtyard, startling

those anxious watchers, to whose excited fancy it seems like an omen of approaching doom.

VI

All eyes are now turned to Cassandra, who seems suddenly to have awakened from her trance, and is staring wildly around her. Then, starting from her seat, she lifts her hands above her head, and utters a low, wailing cry. A statue of Apollo, which stands near, catches her eye, and, gazing on it with a look of terror and reproach, she cries aloud: "Woe, woe is me; Apollo, my Destroyer![1] Lord of Highways, thou has brought me all this long and weary way to die!" She turns to the house, and exclaims, with horror in her looks: "Whither hast thou brought me? What house is this?" "To the home of Agamemnon," answers one of her hearers; "an ancient and honoured house." "A home of horror!" replies Cassandra, wringing her hands; "a home of murder and cannibal feasts! Its floors stream with blood! Look, look! I see them, little children, their faces stained with tears and blood—the wife, the Queen, aiming a deadly stroke at her own lord—he is caught in the toils—she has entangled him in a net. Hark! the Furies are shrieking over that horrid sacrifice. Now she aims her weapon at me; I am stricken—I fall—I

[1] Apollo's name suggests Apollyon, "The Destroyer."

die!" Her voice dies away in sobs and stifled moans, and the old men gather round, with wonder and pity, seeking to know the meaning of her wild, broken cries. But she is lost in the confused visions which race through her fancy, like fragments of cloud whirled before a tempest. When she speaks again, it is in accents of piercing pathos: "O Paris, Paris! Fatal, fatal marriage! Alas! sweet streams of mine own Scamander![1] Sweet flowers, which I culled on thy banks in my happy girlhood! But now I go to chant my prophecies on the shores of Acheron. Ill-fated Priam! Pious prince! What availed thy lavish sacrifices and holy prayers? Thy city lies in ruins, and I, the last of thy daughters, shall soon lie low and cold."

After this last burst of sorrow she descends from the chariot, and addresses the elders in clearer and calmer tones. "No more," she says, "shall my prophecy be seen through a veil, like a newly wedded bride, but shall be borne, sure and strong, into your minds, like the fresh breeze of morning dispersing the clouds. In yonder hall there sits a choir of singers, chanting ever the same chant—and 'Woe! Woe! Woe!' is the burden of their song. Did I say choir?—say rather a revelling rout of sister Furies. They have drunk deep of human blood, but still they cry for more, waiting for a renewal of the curse, which sleeps, but is not dead."

The elders express surprise that she, a stranger,

[1] A river of Troy.

should display such knowledge of the secret history of the house. In reply she tells her strange, sad story. Apollo loved her, and sought her for his bride. She consented, and afterwards broke her promise; and in revenge the god, who had endowed her with the gift of prophecy, ordained that her oracles should never be believed.

She has hardly finished her tale, when the power of the god again descends upon her. Her cheek flushes, and then grows ghastly pale; she pants for breath, and her eyes glare with horror. "See! see!" she cries, "those ghostly forms of children, like the shadowy shapes of dreams—little children, holding out morsels of their own flesh! And there is one[1] who plots revenge on the son of him[2] who wrought this deed—one who has lain in wait for ten long years to prepare this welcome for my lord on his home-coming. Ah! how that foul woman flattered and fawned upon her victim, like a serpent slavering the prey which he is about to swallow! How she shrieked with cruel joy, stunning him with her hideous greeting, this household fury, this demon wife! Believe me or not, it matters little; before many hours have passed ye shall call me in pity but too true a prophetess."

But her words have missed their mark, and reading doubt and perplexity on her hearers' faces, she speaks out plainly: "I tell thee thou shalt look upon Agamemnon's death." — "Peace, miserable

[1] Ægisthus, son of Thyestes. [2] Atreus, father of Agamemnon.

woman! What words are these?"—"The case is past remedy, past aid."—"And by what man's hand shall he fall?"—"'Tis not of any *man* that I spoke."—Here she breaks off, for a new vision rises before her eyes—the vision of her own death. "Again, again, this fire, this burning pang! She will slay me, she will slay me, this lioness, who made her lair with the wolf! She is mixing the cup of her anger, and throws in my death to fill it to the brim." Then her eyes fall on the emblems of her prophetic office—the robe, the wreath, the wand. She tears off robe and wreath, flings them on the ground, and tramples on them, crying: "Away, away! perish, even as I shall perish. Take back thy gifts, great God of Prophecy! they have won me nothing but mockery and shame. Thou madest me a cause of mirth and laughter among my own people, and now thou hast brought me to die in a distant land. Yet not unavenged shall I fall, for a great oath has been sworn in heaven: that the son[1] shall avenge the murder of the sire."

When this last fit of passion has left her, her words grow calm and resigned. "Why should I live?" she says. "Country, home, friends—all are gone; and he who wrought this ruin on my land shall fall in his turn. 'Tis well, then, that I should die. I greet you, proud portals, to me the gates of death! My last prayer is that the blow may strike home, and lay me low without a pang."

[1] Orestes.

She turns to enter the palace, but pauses, and starts back with a gesture of disgust. "'Tis a vault," she cries—"a charnel-house! The air is tainted—ah, no! 'tis a slaughter-house! I smell the smell of blood!" "Poor maid, thy wits are wandering," replies one of the elders; "this is the sweet savour of burnt sacrifice." "Think not that I fear to die," answers Cassandra. "Bear me witness, when the day of vengeance comes, that I met my death nobly, as a royal maiden should. Alas! the lot of man. His happiness is but a shadow, like a wavering outline sketched by an unskilful hand; and if disaster comes, 'tis like the stroke of a wet sponge, leaving the tablet bare and blank."

VII

She is gone, but her words still burn in the ears of the Argive nobles as they stand in their places, waiting to see the end. The shadows are lengthening towards evening, and a death-like stillness dwells upon the scene, as if Time himself were pausing in his flight, awaiting the fulfilment of some dreadful deed. Then all at once from the inner chambers of the castle there goes up a great and terrible cry: "Oh, I am stricken—stricken to the heart!" There is a breathless pause, and then the cry is heard again. The elders start forward, and rush into the palace. Guided by a low, moaning sound, as

of one in the throes of death, they pass through a long gallery, and enter one of the private chambers of the palace. There stands Clytæmnestra, with bloody weapon in hand; and at her feet lies the prostrate form of Agamemnon, gored by three hideous wounds; while huddled in a corner is seen the bleeding and lifeless form of Cassandra.

"Ay, look your fill, men of Argos!" cries the murderess, with an exulting laugh. "There lies your King, and here stand I who have done the deed. Do ye wonder to see me thus, after my tender words of welcome to my spouse? These were but the last touches to a deep-laid plan, designed and perfected through ten long years. Would ye hear how he died? I caught him in his bath, flung over him the ample folds of a rich robe, and smote him, entangled thus, once and again; and there he bowed, and lay down at my feet, and I gave him another thrust to speed him on his way to Hades. His blood splashed me in the face; and my heart laughed within me, as the young harvest laughs after the first summer shower."

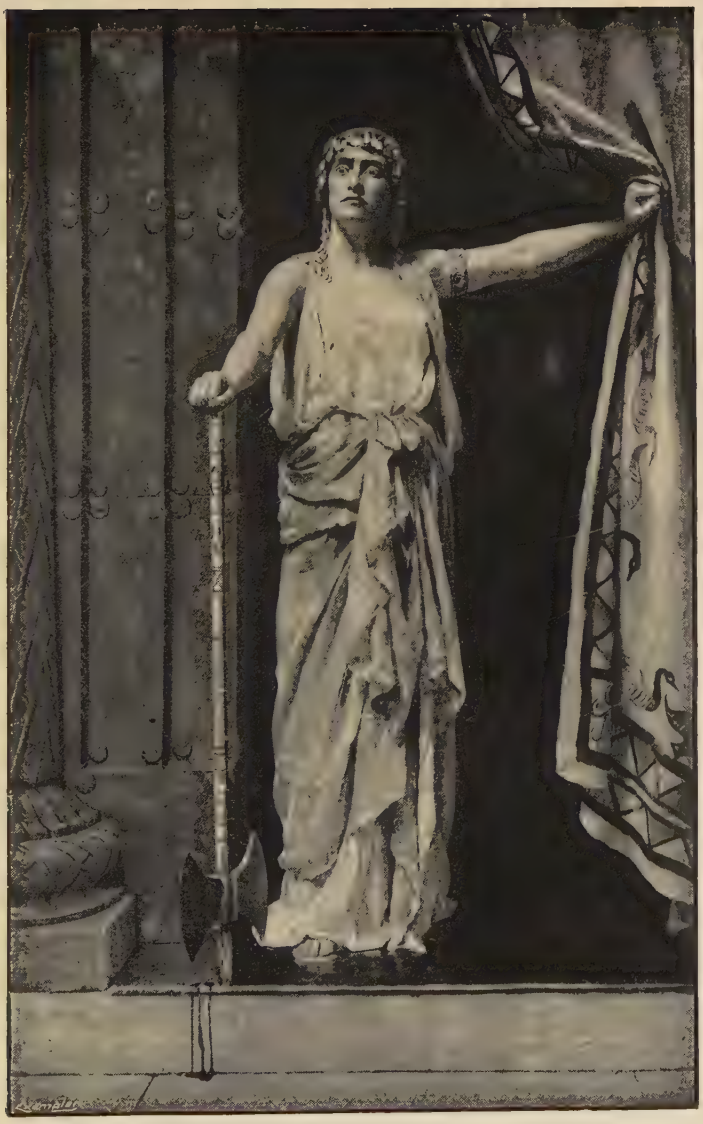
Her hearers are sick with horror, and can only answer her in broken cries: "Woman, what deadly potion hast thou drunk, drawn from the sunless caves of ocean, or distilled from some Stygian plant, to turn thy heart's blood into gall? The brand of murder is on thy brow, and thou shalt be cast out from this city like an accursèd thing."

But if they look for any sign of fear and remorse,

they will not find it here. Boldly she justifies the deed, as the proper recompense for the slaughter of her child. Though all the town should come against her, sword in hand, she has a stout champion ready to aid her, Ægisthus, who shall now take his seat on the throne of Agamemnon. Then she points with scorn to the body of Cassandra. "Have I not given her fair welcome, even as he bade me? Sweetly she sang her death note, like the swan, and now she is laid at her royal master's side, a dish meet for this royal banquet."

This, then, is the end—the last in the long line of woes which sprang from the fatal marriage of Helen with Agamemnon's brother. A fiend was born of that union, and there he seems to sit, like a foul carrion bird, on the body of the murdered King. He has glutted his maw with the blood of thousands, and now he flaps his wings over the last and noblest victim. But is his hunger yet appeased, or must horror breed horror, and crime follow crime, till the whole race of Pelops is swallowed up in the gulf of ancestral guilt?

While the elders are thus mourning over the fallen house of Pelops, and the Queen is glorying in her crime, suddenly the tramp of many feet is heard, and Ægisthus enters, attended by a body of armed men. With the proud mien of a victor he takes his stand by the side of Clytæmnestra, and boasts over the murdered monarch in a strain of impious blasphemy: "Now I know of a truth



Clytæmnestra 50

By permission, from the original picture in the Guildhall Art Gallery

that there is a God in heaven, seeing this man lying here, caught in the snares of vengeance. Now has Atreus paid for that cannibal feast, and the wrongs of my father are requited. The deed is mine, for I planned it from the beginning, therefore I cry: Hail, glorious day of liberty! Justice, thou hast taken thy due."

"Peace, braggart!" cries an aged noble, trembling with indignation. "Peace, cowardly railer! Art thou not ashamed to insult the dead? The deed is thine, sayest thou—thou who wast skulking in safety, while a woman struck the blow?" "What, darest thou use these words to me, rebellious slave?" answers Ægisthus. "I will find a gag for thy mutinous mouth. Wilt thou to school again in thine old age, dotard? We will school thee, and find thee fit teachers—hunger and chains and darkness."

The war of words grows louder and louder, swords are drawn on both sides, and a desperate struggle is about to begin, when Clytæmnestra interposes, and, taking Ægisthus by the arm, leads him away. "Heed not these yelping curs," she says; "they will soon learn who is the master here."

II. ORESTES

Part I

"Perverse mankind! whose wills, created free,
Charge all their woes on absolute decree;
All to the dooming gods their guilt translate,
And follies are miscall'd the crimes of fate.
When to his lust Ægysthus gave the rein,
Did fate, or we, the adulterous act constrain?
Hermes I sent, while yet his soul remain'd
Sincere from royal blood, and faith profaned;
To warn the wretch, that young Orestes, grown
To manly years, should reassert the throne,
Yet, impotent of mind, and uncontroll'd,
He plunged into the gulf which Heaven foretold!"

POPE: "Odyssey."

TWENTY years have passed away, during which Clytæmnestra and Ægisthus have held undisputed sway in the kingdom of Agamemnon. There vice still dwells triumphant, growing fat on the fruits of successful crime. But two things remain to disturb the deep slumber of conscience, and give a motive for unquiet thought: Orestes still lives, now in the first bloom of manhood, with his adopted father in Phocis; and in the palace dwells Electra, daughter of Agamemnon, an embodied reproach to the guilty Queen and her coward mate. At the time of the murder of her father she was a young girl; now she is a woman, approaching middle age, hardened by long years of

ill-usage, nursing a bitter memory, and waiting with heavy heart for the day of retribution.

I

In a secluded spot at some distance from the palace stands the tomb of Agamemnon. Towards this place a band of women, all advanced in years, is moving in slow procession, singing a low and mournful chant. At the head of the train comes a tall and stately lady, whose face, though still beautiful, is marked with sorrow and suffering: it is Electra, with her handmaidens, Trojan captives, bringing libations[1] to pour upon the grave.

For in the dead hour of night the inmates of the royal house had been roused from their slumbers by a loud and terrible cry, ringing out in tones of sharp anguish from the chamber of the Queen, whose repose was broken by a hideous vision. She dreamed that she gave birth to a serpent, and wrapped it in swaddling-clothes like a human babe, but when she would have given the creature suck, it drew blood from her breast. Thereupon she roused the household, summoned the soothsayers, and told them her dream; and they declared that it was a message from the dead, and bade her send her daughter and the handmaidens, with prayers and drink-offerings, to appease the angry spirit of her murdered lord.

[1] Offerings of wine, milk, honey, etc.

Forming a circle round the tomb, they abandon themselves to all the extravagance of Oriental grief: they rend their garments, beat their breasts, and tear their faces with their nails till the blood flows. They hate the office which has been forced upon them by unrighteous power, and curses, not loud, but deep, are mingled with their prayers: "O house accursed, thou hast been wrapped in a horror of great darkness, since the day when the majesty of Argos fell, and the veil is not lifted yet; but justice comes sooner or later—to some in the broad glare of guilty prosperity, to others in the twilight of sinking fortunes and years, to others in the darkness of the grave. Not all the rivers of the land poured into one channel can wash the black stain from a murderer's hand."[1]

When grief and anger have had their way, Electra approaches the tomb, holding in her hand the vessel which contains the drink-offering. She lifts the bowl, then hesitates, and steps back. "What shall I do," she asks, turning to her handmaids, "or with what form of address shall I present my gift? *These, from a loving wife to her loving lord?*—but that would be impious mockery. Or shall I avert mine eyes, and fling the offering over my shoulder, as an unclean thing, sent by an unclean hand?' "Pray to the spirit of the dead that he send a blessing on his friends." "Yes. And aught else?" "And a curse upon his foes." "But is it right-

[1] Comp. *Macbeth.*

eous to ask such a boon of heaven?" "Surely the law stands fast: *Good to thy friend, and evil to thy foe.*"[1]

Thus reassured, Electra pours the libation, and, lifting up her voice, utters this solemn prayer: "Great Power, who movest to and fro between the upper and the lower world, Hermes, carry my message to the spirits beneath the earth: May they strengthen my hands, and the hands of Orestes, in pity for two orphaned children, that the wicked may be thrown down from their pride of place, and righteousness dwell in the halls of iniquity." The maidens follow, in louder and clearer tones: "Hear me, hear me, royal master, in the dim thoughts of thy heart: Let a man arise, a spearman, for deliverance to our house, some champion brandishing in his hands Scythian shafts from bended bow, or wielding in close combat the sword driven home to the hilt."

The rite is paid, and the company is preparing to withdraw, when Electra calls them back, and draws their attention to a lock of hair, which she has just noticed lying on the tomb. She picks up the lock, and lays it close to a tress of her own hair; both are of the same colour—a rich golden brown. The handmaids gather round, full of excited interest, and the name "Orestes" passes from lip to lip. Electra trembles between hope and dread, and her hot tears fall on the curl which she holds in her hand. Oh,

[1] Such was the golden rule of conduct among the Greeks till a purer doctrine was taught by Socrates. See Plato, "Gorgias."

that it had a voice, this beautiful, mute emblem of him whom she has never seen, has so longed to see! Then she notices the mark of men's foot-prints all round the tomb, and eyes them narrowly, comparing them with her own. "The tracks were made by two men," she exclaims, "and the feet of one of them are even as my own."

She is still intent on her scrutiny, when a voice, which seems strangely familiar, is heard close at hand: "May all thy prayers find as happy an answer as thy last!" Raising her eyes from the ground, she perceives a tall youth, of radiant beauty, standing before her. "How meanest thou, fair sir?" she answers in faltering tones. "What answer have my prayers received?" "I am he for whose coming thou didst pray—Orestes, thy brother." Seeing her incredulous, he shows her the place where the lock was severed from his hair, and produces a piece of tapestry, woven by her own hands long years ago. "Look at the texture," he says, "and the figures of animals inwoven, and see if it be not thy very own."

At the sight of these tokens Electra's doubts vanish, and straightway brother and sister are locked together in close embrace. "Orestes, my darling, my life, my all!" she cries passionately. "Thou last green branch of an ancient stock, long watered by my tears, thou art all in all to me—brother, father, sister, mother. Heaven guard thee, and speed thee in the work thou hast to do!"

For some moments they yield to the transports of mutual joy and affection; then Orestes, gently disengaging himself, lifts up his hands to heaven, and calls aloud to Zeus, the divine guardian of every royal race: "Behold, high Lord of Heaven, two young eagles, whose sire a foul viper caught in her coils, and slew; to thee they cry from their orphaned nest, where they lie cold and naked, deprived of his sheltering wing. Surely thy kingly honour will suffer loss, if thou uphold not the last offspring of a line of kings."

During all this scene the handmaidens have been standing apart, conversing with another youth, who, during the interview of the brother and sister, has come forth from his hiding-place among the trees. It is Pylades, the foster-brother and devoted friend of Orestes, who has accompanied him from Phocis. From him they learn how it happened that the lock was found lying at the tomb. Orestes, newly arrived at Mycenæ, was paying his devotions at his father's grave, when he was disturbed by the entrance of Electra and her companions. When this explanation is concluded, the Trojan maidens, alarmed by the loud voice and excited gestures of Orestes, urge on him the necessity of caution, lest the news of his arrival should reach the ears of the Queen.

"Fear nothing," answers Orestes; "I am but a minister of divine wrath, sent by Apollo to execute fierce vengeance on his foes—my mother and my

cousin. He will not suffer his instrument to fail. Awful was the voice which issued from his shrine at Delphi, and horrible the doom which he pronounced on me if I failed to obey his behest: 'Foul disease shall fasten on thy body, making thy fair young flesh loathsome to behold; thy clustering locks shall wither to a few thin white hairs; and the angry ghost of thy father shall pursue thee day and night, murdering thy sleep, and haunting thee with visions of horror. Thou shalt be spurned from every city, from every house, and wander, an outcast in desert places, till thou waste away in solitude and shame.' A command like this, armed with such terrors, how can I dare to disobey? And though the god had never spoken, yet my own heart would urge me to the deed. Shall I wander, a homeless beggar, and leave this wealthy heritage, this ancient city, peopled by the conquerors of Troy, in the hands of a woman, a murderess, and that man-woman, Ægisthus? Lead on, mighty god! Whither thou callest I follow, and thy will is mine."

Not light is the task laid on the young hero by the iron hand of Fate. The strongest of all ties—the duty of a son to his mother—must be torn asunder: he must point his sword against the bosom of her who bore him! Such was the savage justice of those days. The mother had slain the sire, the son is to slay his mother. Therefore, to

steel his heart for the awful deed, he joins with his sister and her handmaids in a fierce litany to summon the spirit of his father, and the avenging powers which dwell with him in the unseen world, that they may be his abettors and ghostly allies. And this was the mystical chant sung alternately by Orestes, Electra, and the captive Trojan women:

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, blood for blood: awake, Justice, and strike, for thine hour is come.
The fire burns the body, but the spirit remains,[1] breathing vengeance from the tomb.
Awake, father, awake, from thy long sleep, and hearken to the cry of thine orphaned children:
That the voice of wailing may become the voice of triumph, and our sorrow may be turned into joy.
Would God thou hadst died before the walls of Troy, pierced by the spear of a noble foe:
So hadst thou lain in an honoured tomb, a burden easy to be borne.
But a fiend lay couched by the royal victor's hearth, and smote him in his hour of pride.
She lopped his hands, she lopped his feet, and buried him in a bed of shame.[2]
Smite, smite the tomb,[3] and call aloud: Rise, thou that sleepest, father, come!
Not vain are all our cries and tears: he is awake, he comes, he comes!
Then open wide, ye stony doors! I hear the footsteps of the dead."

[1] Comp. Gray's "*Elegy*": "E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires."
[2] It was thought that the mutilation of a murdered man's body rendered him incapable of pursuing his murderers with vengeance after death.
[3] So in the *Iliad* (ix. 568) the mother of Meleager kneels on the ground, and beats the earth with her hands, calling aloud to the spirits of vengeance who dwell below.

When all the dues of religion and filial piety are fully paid, Orestes inquires the meaning of the ceremonies which he has witnessed from his place of concealment. "Why," he asks, "did my false mother send these gifts to the tomb? The wound is past healing; though she spent all her substance in offerings to the dead, 'twere but an idle waste." In reply to his question he receives an account of the terrible dream, which roused the seared conscience of the godless woman to make this vain atonement. "It was no dream," answers Orestes, "but a true vision, whose meaning she shall shortly learn from me. I am that serpent, armed with mortal sting, to pierce her guilty heart." After this he enters into a whispered consultation with Electra and her friends, the result of which will appear hereafter.

II

Clytæmnestra sits alone in her chamber, watching the last glimmer of departing day. She is waiting for the return of Ægisthus, who is absent on affairs of State. The strong, hard nature of the terrible Queen, which had been severely shaken by the vision of last night, has already recovered all its firmness. "Am I a child," she mutters, chiding her late weakness, "to be startled by dreams and shadows? A serpent, sayest thou? Nay, a worm; and *thus* do I crush it," grinding her heel into the carpet.

A loud knocking at the outer gate of the castle interrupts her reverie, and with a glad look of welcome she starts from her seat, and hurries to meet her lord. On the way she is met by a servant, who informs her that two strangers are standing at the gate, desiring shelter for the night. "Let them be admitted," she answers, and descends into the great hall to receive the visitors. There she finds two comely youths, dressed in the garb of Phocis, who greet her in the broad Doric of northern Greece. "You are welcome, young sirs," she answers graciously, "to this royal house, where ye shall dwell in honour, with all fitting entertainment. In me ye will find a pious and gentle hostess, and if ye have graver business to despatch, my lord shall confer with you." Then the taller of the two strangers speaks, and both in voice and in face he has a startling likeness to Clytæmnestra: "Lady, I am a stranger, journeying on my own business from Phocis to this land; and on my way I met a man unknown to me, who asked me whither I was bound, and, learning that I was for Argos, bade me carry a message to the mother of Orestes." At the mention of this name Clytæmnestra is all attention; and Electra, who has been standing a silent witness of the scene,[1] bends forward eagerly to learn the rest. The supposed Phocian continues: "His name, he said, was Strophios of Phocis, and he bade me tell you that

[1] I have here followed the interpretation of Mr Walter Headlam.

Orestes is dead. His ashes are gathered in an urn, waiting for burial, and Strophios desires to know whether you would have them sent hither, to be buried in the tomb of his fathers, or whether they are to rest in the land of his adoption."

Clytæmnestra stands silent, with ill-concealed joy; but Electra, who has been well schooled in dissimulation, utters a loud lament: "Oh, we are spoiled and laid waste utterly! Fell demon of the house, thou hast long been watching thine hour, and now thou hast struck, and our last hope is overthrown. Now Infamy may lift high her head, for naught remains of this house to stay the carnival of crime."

The stranger, whom we have already recognised as Orestes himself, makes a formal expression of regret for his ill tidings; but Clytæmnestra, interrupting him, promises to reward him after the measure of his service, and then, turning to Electra, orders her roughly to take the strangers to the guest-chamber. "And see that they lack nothing," she adds, with a dark look at her daughter, whose last words have struck home, "as thou shalt answer for it. We know who are our friends, and with them we will take such measures as seem fitting after this *sad event*."[1] Having spoken thus, with a mocking emphasis on the last two words, she leaves the room. Electra goes out with Orestes

[1] She is probably hinting at some design against her daughter's life or liberty.

and Pylades, and the Trojan handmaids, her late companions at the tomb of Agamemnon, remain conversing in low tones on the scene they have just witnessed.

While they are thus occupied an old woman enters the room, halting on a staff, and muttering to herself. It is the aged nurse of Orestes, who tended him in his helpless infancy, but lost her charge while he was yet in swaddling-clothes. "Whither away, good nurse?" asks one of the handmaids. The old dame pauses, and answers, after a burst of weeping: "I go at my lady's command to call Ægisthus, that he may hear from the strangers the report they bring. She thought to deceive the old slave with her false-mourning face, but I saw the wicked laughter in her eyes. Glad tidings, in sooth, for her, and a dainty message for the ears of our good lord! Oh, woe is me! Long have I mourned over this fallen house; its sorrows have been mine these many weary years. But still I was held up by one last hope; now it is gone, and I am undone. Orestes, my darling, child of my sorrow! I took thee from thy mother's arms, and watched over thee day and night with eye and ear and hand and foot, ever ready in thy service. I knew thee only as a helpless, speechless babe; and now thou art gone, and all my toil is wasted, without one word or look of kindness from thee. Well, I must go, and carry my fair message to this waster and spoiler of our

house." "Stay, dame, a moment," answers one of the company—the same who addressed her before. "Tell me, wast thou bidden to summon him alone, or was he to bring with him his guards?" "She bids him come attended," answers the nurse. "Hear me, then," replies the handmaid. "Bid him to come alone, and to fear nothing, for the last cause of fear is vanished; and put on a cheerful face, as one who rejoices in his joy." "Art thou glad, then, that Orestes is dead?" "He is not dead; he is no true prophet who says so." "What meanest thou? Knowest thou aught besides what we have heard?" "Go, carry thy message as we bid thee; by God's help all may yet be well."

Failing to get any clearer answer, and somewhat comforted by what she has heard, the nurse promises to do as she is advised, and hurries away on her errand.

A great stillness falls on the house, whose very stones seem to be waiting and listening for the coming of Ægisthus. Orestes sits silent, with his sister and friend in the guest-chamber, with knitted brow and hand on hilt. In the great hall their friends, the Trojan ladies, utter many a silent prayer to Zeus, Apollo, and Hermes, that they may guide the avenger's hand; while alone in her bower sits Clytæmnestra, and her heart laughs within her, as she thinks of the long days of luxury and power which lie before her, now that this last cloud has vanished from her life.

III

He comes, the gay usurper, the smooth minion of a queen, a lie on his lips and treason in his heart. "What is this lamentable news," he asks, addressing the handmaids, "touching the death of Orestes, our dear cousin? Surely that were a burden not to be borne by this groaning house, sick already, and sore, with its old wounds yet unhealed. Is it true, or is it an idle rumour, born of a woman's giddy mind, as the sparks fly upward, no sooner kindled than quenched? Hast thou aught to add which may carry conviction to my heart?" "We know nothing further," is the reply; "'tis best that thou go thyself, and examine the messenger face to face." "I shall prove him shrewdly—of that be thou well assured," answers the boaster. "Falsehood will perish on his lips before my searching eye. Many a man has been slain by report and come to life again."

Hardly has the sound of his footsteps died away, when a piercing shriek rings through the house. The women leave their station in the great hall to await the issue in a safe hiding-place, and a moment after an excited domestic rushes into the room, crying distractedly: "He is slain! Ægisthus is murdered! Help! Help!" And with frantic clamour he knocks at the doors which lead to the private apartments of the Queen. After some

delay the bolts are drawn back, and Clytæmnestra appears, and angrily demands the meaning of this uproar. "It means that the living are being slain by the dead," is the riddling answer. The Queen turns pale: she can well read the riddle. "I see thy drift," she says. "By guile we slew, by guile we shall be slain." But even in this extremity she shows the dauntless courage of a great though ruined soul. "Go, bring me an axe," she cries; "I will either kill or be killed." But it is too late; before the last word has left her lips, Orestes stands before her, with a dripping sword in his hand, followed closely by Pylades; and on his pale, set face she reads her doom. "Ha! art thou here? I was seeking thee. The other is sped." A stifled sob escapes from Clytæmnestra—the last words have touched her in her one tender place, her love for the worthless Ægisthus. "Thou lovest him, then?" says her son. "Well, thou shalt be buried in the same grave, and never forsake him more." The Queen cowers before his fierce taunts, and tries to move his pity: "Forbear, my son, forbear! Wilt thou not reverence this breast, which nourished thee and pillowed thy helpless head?" For a moment Orestes falters: "How sayest thou, Pylades?" he asks. "Shall I spare her life?" "Where, then, are the oracles of Phœbus and his solemn shrine?" answers his friend. "Wilt thou lay perjury to thy soul? Let all men hate thee, but shun the hate of heaven." "Thou hast

said well," replies Orestes. Then, turning to his mother, he says: "Go thou before me; I will slay thee at his side. He was thy choice in life; for him thou didst thrust down my father from his seat; and thou shalt be his partner in death." Still Clytæmnestra pleads: "I nursed thee young; let me grow old with thee." "What, dwell with thee, my father's murderess?" "Fate had her part in slaying him, my child." "Then Fate shall have her part in slaying thee." "Dost thou not dread a mother's curse, my son?" "No; for that mother cast me out from home." "Thou hadst safe harbour in a friendly house." "A free-born chieftain, I was bought and sold." "Sold? What was, then, my guerdon? Tell me that." "I dare not name it; 'twere a shame to tell."

For some time the mother continued her entreaties, fighting with words against naked steel. At last the dreadful debate is ended by Orestes with this final sentence: "'Twas thy hand slew my father: thou must die." Then, lifting his weapon, he advances against Clytæmnestra, who retires slowly before him, and is thus driven out of the room at the point of the sword.

After a brief interval the voices of the women are heard again, as they return to the hall, proclaiming in tones of triumph that the dreadful deed is done:

"Lift up thy head, thou ancient house, the blow has fallen, the spoiler is slain.

From the Delphian cave the avenger came, Apollo sent
him, and Hermes[1] led.
He led him with guile to the destined goal, where
Justice waited, the virgin maid.
She touched the sword with her finger pure, and blessed
the blade, and hallowed the deed.
The hand of the Healer[2] has reached the house, and
foul pollution is purged away."

IV

The whole household is assembled on the scene of the double execution, which is the same spot which witnessed the murder of Agamemnon twenty years ago. Orestes is seen standing over the bodies of Clytæmnestra and Ægisthus; in one hand he holds his sword, in the other the robe in which his father was slain. "There lie your oppressors," he says; "there lie my father's murderers, the spoilers of my house. Loving and faithful were they in life, and in death they are not divided." Then holding up the robe, dark with old blood stains, he continues: "Behold the snare in which she caught my father, and slew him; spread it out, that he may see it, the father—not mine, but Helios, with his all-righteous eye; let him be witness in the day of my trial. I speak not of Ægisthus—there the law is clear—but she, the bride of his youth, the wife, the mother of his children, to arm her hand with murder against her lord! Oh,

[1] The God of Cunning and Strategy. [2] Apollo, God of Medicine.

cursed thing, foul viper, whose very touch was pollution!"

"Thou ill-fated man," cries one of his hearers, overcome by the horror of the scene, "thou hast sown the seed in blood, and thou shalt pluck the fruit in madness. 'Twas an awful deed!" Orestes catches at the last words, and answers in wilder tones: "Ay; an awful deed it was, as thou sayest. Look!"—pointing to the robe—"this horrid rent! There plunged the sword—a wife aimed the blow—there fled my father's life. Oh, hideous stain! Murder has dyed the web. My eyes are full of blood!"

With a great effort he wrestles against the frenzy which is fast overpowering his reason, and, turning to Pylades, takes from his hands a wreath and branch of olive. He places the wreath on his head, and, holding the branch in his hand, speaks again in calmer tones: "Now I am prepared. Hear me again, while I am still master of my wits. My heart is bursting, my brain reels, in my ears there is a strange music, and soon I must dance a wild measure, while madness plays the tune. Then hear me, I say, before my senses fail. In this distraction I flee to my strong rock of defence, the prophet-god,[1] at whose command I did this deed. I go, as he bade me, to his shrine at Delphi; there will I plead my cause. And you, men of Argos, I summon for the days to come, to bear me witness in my sad, sad story."

[1] Apollo.

He turns to go, then pauses, as if rooted to the spot, gazing with a wild stare into vacancy. "See! see!" he shrieks, "that hideous face! She comes, she comes! Black is her raiment, coils of serpents writhe and hiss around her head. 'Tis the avenging fiend of my mother. Look! Another, and another! They throng round me on all sides, their eyes are dripping with gore. They drive me before them. I go! I go!" He rushes out, pursued by that shadowy band.

III. ORESTES

Part II

ORESTES:

Mother!—beseech thee, hark not thou on me
Yon maidens gory-eyed and snaky-haired!
Lo there!—lo there!—they are nigh—they leap on me!

ELECTRA:

Stay, hapless one, unshuddering on thy couch:
Naught of thy vivid vision seest thou.

ORESTES:

Ah, Phœbus!—they shall slay me—hound-faced fiends,
Goddesses dread, hell's gorgon-priestesses!

A. R. WAY, from EURIPIDES.

I

THE hunt is up, and the human quarry flies, over hill and valley, over moist and dry, with those dreadful hounds of hell hard on his track. We, who follow the chase more at our

leisure, find ourselves standing, in the dewy hour of dawn, before the stately Temple of Apollo at Delphi. The very spirit of peace seems to dwell on this holy spot. Who would dream, as he gazes on the cold, marble majesty of the Temple front, with its sculptured legend of heroes and gods, that within those portals there cowers a guilty wretch, polluted by an unnatural murder? All the valley still lies shrouded in the gigantic shadow of Parnassus, but high in air two spots of rosy light show where his twin peaks are glowing in the first rays of the morning sun.

A small group of worshippers is standing at the Temple gate, waiting for the arrival of the priestess by whose mouth the god declares his will. Soon she appears, an aged woman of stately presence, leaning on a staff, and wearing the robes of a prophetess. She pauses before the entrance, and utters a solemn prayer to those ancient powers who of old time held dominion here—to Earth, in whose solemn caverns mysterious voices are heard, foretelling things to be; to Themis, in whose name the first temple of righteousness was built, with foundations strong and deep; and to that other child of Cronos, the Mother of Light, from whose hallowed hands the young Apollo received the sceptre of Delphi.

Her prayer ended, the priestess turns to the worshippers, who have been waiting respectfully for her directions. "Let those," she says, "who would ask counsel of the god draw lots, as the custom is,

and enter the Temple one by one. I go to take my seat on the chair of prophecy; and may the gods make this day a day of peculiar blessing to me and to you." Having uttered this pious wish, she ascends the steps, and passes into the Temple.

The anxious pilgrims remain in their allotted places, expecting the summons from within; but this day Apollo has other work to do, and his oracle will be dumb. After what seems a long interval the priestess is seen returning; with tottering footsteps, clutching at every pillar for support, "with shuddering horror pale, and eyes aghast," slowly she comes towards them. "Go your ways," she falters, addressing the wondering crowd; "go your ways, ye Greeks! This is no place for you to-day. Ask me not what I have seen. Horror and pollution have made their abode in this holy seat; but Apollo is mighty, and he shall cleanse it again. Go; and return not until the place is pure." Thereupon she retires to her dwelling, and the little band of worshippers moves slowly away.

II

We, who have come on other business, may now enter the Temple, and see that terrible sight which has so affrighted the ancient prophetess. Passing through the outer court, rich with the thank-offerings of a hundred cities, we enter an inner chamber, or chapel, behind which is the shrine itself, Apollo's

hallowed abode. In the centre is an altar. Kneeling before it we recognise the figure of Orestes; his brow is wreathed with fresh shoots of the olive, and in one hand he holds a blood-stained sword. Around him, on the altar steps, lies a grisly troop, now sunk in deep slumber; in form they are women — but women clothed with attributes of horror. They breathe fitfully, with convulsive starts and groans; instead of hair their head is crowned with hissing serpents; from their closed eyelids ooze slowly drops of blood. From head to foot they are clothed in deepest black; for these are none other than the Dreadful Goddesses, the Furies, Daughters of Night, and ministers of vengeance.

Within the shrine itself, at the farther end of the chapel, are seen two forms of more than human majesty and beauty—Apollo, Lord of the Temple, and his brother Hermes. Then clear and high is heard the voice of Apollo, bringing new hope and comfort to that shivering wretch who crouches at the altar: "Fear nothing, my servant; my help is ever with thee, whether I be near or far. There they lie, fettered in slumber by my power, these fiends whom gods and men, and even beasts, abhor. Nevertheless, fly thou from their presence, for they shall awake, and pursue thee over land and sea. Up, then, and get thee to the city of Pallas,[1] and take harbour in her shrine, holding fast to her ancient image. There shalt thou be cleansed and

[1] Athens.

healed of thy soul's sore disease. And do thou, Hermes, perform thine office, and conduct him safely to the land where he shall find peace."

III

The Furies are left sleeping on the altar steps, while Orestes, under Hermes' guidance, is speeding on his way to Athens. There he is to plead his cause, with Apollo for his high advocate. No sooner have they departed than a shadowy shape arises in the midst of the slumbering band, with threatening gestures, and anger in her looks; it is the ghost of the murdered Clytæmnestra. "Ay, sleep," she cries; "sleep on, my faithful friends, while I roam in dishonour, loathed and avoided by my fellow-shades. In the dark night of death one voice pursues me, crying: 'She slew her lord!' But none finds utterance for the fouler crime: 'She was slain by her son!' Are my wrongs nothing?" She points to her breast, and moans: "Look at this wound, and remember who made it. Was I not instant in your service while I lived, rising in the dead hour of night, when all other gods sleep, to pour your sober[1] draught and kindle the flame of sacrifice for you? And this is my reward! Ye have let the quarry go when he was fenced in on every side, caught in the toils, like a young fawn.

[1] Wine was always excluded from the worship of the Furies.

Theatre of Dionysus

Where the citizens of ancient Athens gathered to hear the tragedies of Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides

Photo E.N.A.

List, list! 'Tis I who call, the outcast spirit of a mother foully slain. Give ear, ye powers of earth! Hearken, and awake!"

But deep is the trance which has drowsed the senses of these hounds of vengeance, weary with their long chase, and subdued by Apollo's powerful spell. They murmur and toss in their sleep, and Clytæmnestra assails them again with fierce and scornful tones: "Sleep on; he has escaped you; he has his friends, but I am naught. Ye are baffled, ye are mocked; your power is gone!" One of the troop stands erect, crying: "Seize him, seize him, mark him down!" then sinks back, and slumbers again. With hideous yell, waving her arms over the sleepers, Clytæmnestra once more storms their ears: "Up, up! Sleep no more! The murderer flies! After him, seize him, drag him down, waste him and blast him with your breath, dry up his blood, wither his heart!" Her last appeal has proved effectual, and the ghost sinks beneath the ground.

The whole wolfish pack is now afoot, howling with rage at the flight of their victim. Forming a circle round the altar, they give utterance to their feelings in a weird and wailing chant:

"Woe for our labour spent, woe for the long, long chase!
The net is broken, the victim's fled;
We were mocked by the fair, false god, we were foiled
at the end of the race,
Sleep on our eyelids shed.

Harbour and shelter for him, who smote his mother; and slew?
(O deed of horror, O godless son!)
The law of righteousness spurned, the old gods mocked by the new!
By Heaven, 'twas foully done.

I cowered, I shuddered with shame, when it reached my slumbering sense,
With taunts both bitter and keen,
Like the stroke of the hangman's lash, like the goad driven home to the quick,
The voice of the murdered Queen.

For the ancient shrine of the gods, by stain of murder defiled,
Is turned to a den of shame;
There sits the usurper enthroned,[1] and sentence lawless and wild
Is given in Justice' name.

But the doom is sure, it shall fall, with a double weight, and abide,
On that accursèd head;
It shall reach him yet, though he fly to the ends of the earth, though he hide
Down, down among the dead."

They have hardly finished their song when the young god of the Temple stands before them, with signs of anger on his beautiful face. "Get you gone, Daughters of Night," he says, "this is no place for you. Begone, rid me of your loathed presence, or I will pierce you with an arrow from

[1] Apollo, representing the younger dynasty of gods, while the Furies uphold the ancient rule of Cronos. See *Prometheus*.

this golden bow, and let some of that blood wherewith ye have glutted your foul maws. Go, seek the kindred hag to whom ye howl your praises, that ancient Justice who finds joy in sights of horror and shame — in headless trunks and eyeless heads, in stoning, mutilation, childless homes, and the shrieks of impaled wretches writhing on the stake. Take ye your part in that barbarous feast, or make your lair in the lions' den, if ye will, but shed not pollution any longer on this holy place. Away to your pastures, abhorrèd flock! Apollo cannot shepherd[1] such lambs as you."

The Furies are not easily daunted. They answer scorn for scorn, reproaching the god for his defence of a matricide. "And the murder of a husband," replies Apollo—"was that no sin? To cut in twain the sacred bond of wedlock, hallowed by Zeus and his high consort Hera—was not that a crime of the deepest dye?" "Far less than his," argue the Furies, "who stained his hands with his mother's blood." "Well, Athene shall try the cause," answers Apollo, "in her ancient city. Follow him thither if ye choose, but your labour will be in vain."

"To Athens! To Athens!" cry the Furies. "Up, faithful hounds of Justice; follow the scent of a mother's blood!"

[1] Apollo, among his many attributes, was a pastoral god.

IV

On the summit of a steep hill called the Acropolis, in the centre of Athens, stands the Temple of Athene, patron goddess of the city. There, clinging to the statue of the goddess, kneels Orestes, and prays to the stainless maid for protection and favour. "Our Lady of Athens," he murmurs, "Jove's virgin daughter, hearken to my petition. I come to thee at Apollo's command, with half my guilt already purged away, and beseech thee to lay thy hand upon me, and make me wholly clean."

But his penance is not yet past. Already the Furies are close upon him, questing like hounds on the track of a wounded deer. Their terrible voices sound in his ears, giving tongue on the hot scent. "Follow, follow the felon's tainted footsteps. See, there he is, holding fast to the image of the maid! Close in upon him! The chase is over! He is ours!" They form the fatal circle around him, and the hissing of the serpents on their heads mingles with the hoarse music of their throats, as they chant a short song of triumph, whose fitful cadence seems to pant and sob with their breathless passion:

"Guard him close, lest he fly;
Hand in hand, let us stand,
Keen of eye.
At the altar he kneels, but in vain;
Naught can cleanse, naught can wash out the stain;

For the blood, which the earth once has drunk,
The blood of a mother, which sunk
At his feet, naught can bring back again.
Blood for blood thou shalt pay, to the last
Ruddy drop in thy heart; we will drain
All the sap from thy limbs, and then cast
Thee to wither and waste in the pit;
Far below thou shalt sit,
And the voice of thy wailing shall reach
Guilty hearts here on earth, and shall teach
All who wrong
Friend or guest, father, mother, or god,
That the Fates have a rod,
And the hand of the Furies is strong."[1]

Alone in the presence of these fearful beings Orestes yet feels that he is already beyond their power, strong in the favour of Athene and Apollo. He has been cleansed by solemn ceremonies at Delphi, and his purification is to be completed here in Athens. He is no longer the polluted outcast, shunned and abhorred by men; Time, the great healer, has been slowly doing his work, and soon this last and deepest stain will be washed away from the ancient house of Pelops. Therefore once more he lifts up his hands to Athene, summoning her to his aid. "Hear me, great goddess, and vouchsafe thy presence, wheresoe'er thou be, whether thou art sitting or standing on the shore of Trito, thy native lake in Africa, or on the Burning Plain where thou and thy fellow-gods

[1] The Fates and Furies are closely associated by the ancient poets; sometimes they are identified. Comp. Milton, "Lycidas": "Comes the blind Fury with the abhorrèd shears."

overthrew the fierce blood of Cronos: incline thine ear unto me, and bring me comfort and release."

But the Furies are not easily to be deterred from their purpose. "Neither Apollo nor the might of Athene," says their leader, "shall save thee from perdition. Thou art bound to a place where no joy is, but only sorrow and weeping; thou art our victim, our creature, a choice morsel set apart for the nether fiends. Come, sisters, fence him close on every side, and bind him to us with mystic dance and song." Thereupon, with wild gestures, pacing slowly around him, the weird sisters begin to weave their spell. They call aloud to their mother, primeval Night, invoking her aid against the wrong they have suffered from Apollo, who has saved their victim and dishonoured their office. They stand alone, cut off from all the bright hierarchy of heaven, without part or lot among the children of light. Their dwelling is in the sunless regions of the underworld, "'mid horrid shapes and shrieks and sights unholy"; there they receive the tribute of terror, in solitude and the horror of great darkness. Zeus, and the powers who reign under him, scorning to take note of deeds of bloodshed and household crime, as a thing unworthy of their divine presence, left this gloomy office to them, and shall this, their last privilege, now be torn from them? No; this shall never be! There crouches the victim, ready for the sacrifice; above him hovers Vengeance, poised like a vulture

stooping over his prey. Now shall the guilty wretch, caught in those pitiless talons, be borne away to his appointed place:

> "There to converse with everlasting groans,
> Unrespited, unpitied, unreprieved,
> Ages of hopeless end."

V

She has heard his prayer: she is here, the daughter of Zeus, Pallas Athene; there she stands, the warrior-goddess, bearing on her arm the tasselled ægis,[1] and gazes in wonder on the strange visitors who have invaded her holy temple. Some signs of disgust are visible on her majestic features as she beholds the savage figures of the Furies; but, quickly repressing her feelings, she speaks with calm dignity, demanding what their presence means. "Say, thou who kneelest at my altar, and you, whate'er you be—such forms I ne'er beheld in heaven, nor among the daughters of men—what seek ye here?" "We are the children of Night," answers the leader of the band; "and we are pursuing that man, to take him to a place where the voice of joy is never heard." "What is his crime?" asks the goddess. "He dared to slay his mother." "But perchance he was driven by dire necessity." "No necessity," replies the Fury, "could justify such a deed." "Let me hear the other side," says Athene. "Speak, thou who

[1] The shield of Athene was so called.

holdest my image with thy hands; whence and what art thou, and what is thy story? Let me hear what claim thou hast to my favour, if so be that I may save and cleanse thee, as my father cleansed Ixion, the first murderer."

"Hear my defence, dread lady," answers Orestes, "but think not that thou hast before thee a common felon, new reeking from the slaughter. Not till all holy rites had been paid, and the stain of homicide removed by prayer and sacrifice and penance, have I dared to approach thy shrine." Then he reveals his name, and tells all the tale from the beginning, not forgetting to mention the awful threats by which Apollo drove him to do the deed. "Thou art my last hope and refuge," he adds in conclusion, "do thou decide between the right and the wrong; by thy sentence I am content to stand or fall."

"Too heavy is the task, even for me," replies Athene, "to decide the sharp issues of a murderous feud. Yet art thou pure, as thou sayest, and thy sin is already purged away. Therefore will I not reject thee or cast thee out. But these too have their rights, and we must not offend them, lest the dropping venom of their malice fall upon this land, and breed a pestilence not to be cured. Therefore, as a remedy for this hard case, I am resolved to institute, here in this city, a seat of justice, with sworn judges, for all those by whom blood has been shed. Go ye, prepare your charge, and bring witnesses to prove it, while I choose out faithful

men from among my citizens, and instruct them in the duties of their solemn office."

Left alone with Orestes the Furies bewail the downfall of the primeval law of justice, and prophesy a general reign of violence and terror in every home, now that the slayer of his mother is about to escape from their hands. "Tremble, ye who are parents," they cry, "before your children! There is a sword ready to pierce your hearts. The might of the Furies is foiled; then call up havoc, give loose rein to lawless passion, and let desolation fall on every hearth. When the cup of iniquity is full, and foul disorder has done its worst, then, too late, shall men call on the ancient guardians of righteousness, and mourn over the Furies' fallen throne. There is a steadfast pillar which upholdeth the Temple of Justice—even fear; and the path to wisdom lies through sorrow and pain. Give ear, all ye who toil and wander blindly in life's dark ways, to the voice of duty, and her staff shall guide you into the green pastures of plenty and peace. But if ye harden your hearts against her, and come not when she calls, then the staff shall turn to a whip of scorpions, and drive you into the gulf of ruin, where none shall hear your drowning cry."

VI

The scene now changes to the Areopagus, or

Hill of Ares,[1] opposite the Acropolis, a little to the west. Here Athene has appointed her High Court of Justice. The twelve judges, chosen from the wisest of the citizens, are in their places, and Athene presides. The precincts of the Court are thronged by a great crowd of Athenians, eager spectators of the grand assize.

The trumpet sounds, announcing that the session has begun, and the voice of the herald is heard, proclaiming silence. "Who appears for the accused?" asks Athene. "I," answers Apollo, rising from his seat; "I am both witness and defender, for I bore the first part in this man's crime, if crime it be." The Furies interpose, denying his right to appear in such a case; but their protest is overruled, and the trial opens with a sharp exchange of question and answer between Orestes and the eldest of the Furies. "I ask thee this plain question," says his accuser: "Didst thou slay thy mother or no?" "I slew her; I cannot deny it." "Now tell the Court how thou didst slay her." "With my sword I pierced her throat." "By thine own warrant, or prompted by another?" "I obeyed the command of him who defends me here." "A weak defence, as thou shalt learn ere long." "I am my father's son; I claim no kin with her." "No kin with her? Make plain that impious word." "Apollo answers for me; let him speak."

[1] Mars.

Thus appealed to, Apollo takes up the defence. "I stand for justice," he says, "under a higher law than that to which the accuser appeals, the law of Zeus my sire, whose true prophet I am." "And wilt thou tell us," asks the accusing Fury, "that Zeus has no regard to a mother's right, that the father is all in all, the mother naught?" "What is a woman's life," replies Apollo, "compared to the life of a great monarch and mighty warrior, struck down in the hour of triumph by the treacherous hand of his wife?" The Fury retorts that Zeus had little respect for his own father, Cronos, whom he wounded, and bound in chains. "Ye loathèd monsters!" exclaims Apollo, incensed by this taunt, "chains can be loosed, and that offence made good; but when once the dust has drunk a man's life-blood, no power—no, not even Zeus himself—can bring it back again."

His opponent now makes a last appeal. "Shall the son," she asks, "who shed his mother's blood, go back and dwell in honour in the ancient seat of his fathers? How shall he dare to stand before the altars of the gods? With what face shall he take part in the joyous festival, where kinsman pledges kinsman over the sacred bowl?" Apollo has his answer ready. "Hear how the law stands," he says, "in this case. The right of the father is far above the right of the mother. He is the superior, and to him the first duty of the child is owed. The father's claim is first; be Pallas my

witness, the maid of manly mind, born of no mother, but her father's own true child." Then addressing the twelve, who are at once judge and jury, he says: "Take heed, ye citizens, how ye deal with him who stands before you for trial to-day. I can make your city great, and I have brought this man hither as a pledge of firm treaty and alliance between Argos and Athens."

The accuser has no more to say. "I have shot my last arrow," she exclaims; "let sentence be given." Hereupon Athene, as president, addresses the judges. "Hear my ordinance," she says, "ye people of Athens. This Court, which to-day meets for the first time on the sacred Hill of Ares, shall henceforth hold its perpetual session for the trial of all who are charged with murder. And here Reverence, and her sister Fear, shall dwell, watching day and night, the sleepless guardians of the public weal. Now rise from your places one by one, and give your vote, Guilty or Not guilty. Take heed to your oath, and vote as good men and true."

Thus solemnly adjured the judges rise from their seats, and approach the urns, two in number, in which their votes are recorded. Each holds in his hands two pebbles, a black and a white—the black one for "Guilty," the white one for "Not guilty." Apollo and the Furies stand near, and engage in a lively dispute while the voting proceeds. "Beware the Furies' wrath," cries one of the fatal

sisters to the judges as they approach. "Beware my anger, if ye respect not mine oracles," retorts Apollo. "Heed not these; their power is passed away; they have no honour in heaven." "Thou art true to thyself," says a Fury, mockingly; "thou hast deceived us before, in the house of Pheres,[1] giving us strong wine to make us sleep." Apollo laughs. "Spit out your venom, poor soul," he says, "thou hast no power to harm." "Oh, I am scorned," cries the Fury, "trampled down by this young god! Here I stand, holding back my wrath, like a hound in the leash; if the vote be against me, ye shall feel his fangs."

Athene has the casting vote, which she holds back while the other pebbles are being counted. It is an anxious moment, and the chief actors in the scene give vent to their excitement in broken exclamations. "O Apollo," cries Orestes, "what shall this hour bring forth for me—freedom, or a halter?" "O Night, dread mother," exclaim the Furies, "let thine eye be upon this deed."

The votes are equal—six for Orestes, six against him. "He is acquitted," says Athene. "Here I give my casting vote for the accused." And she places a white pebble among the six lying before her.

Thus the dark cloud which has rested for many generations on the house of Pelops is removed; the blood-feud is ended at last, and Orestes may return, in freedom and honour, to the home of his

[1] See *Alcestis*.

fathers. But first a solemn promise of friendship and alliance is given to the city to which he owes so much; which done, he leaves the Court, accompanied by Apollo.

VII

The rage of the Furies now breaks forth in threats of horrible vengeance against the land which has witnessed and abetted their overthrow. "I will stretch out my hand," cries their leader, "and smite the soil of Attica with a curse: on your wives, on your flocks, it shall fall, and on all their little ones; on tree and herb and every green ear shall a blight descend, and the land shall become a desert. Then shall ye know what we are—we, the Daughters of Night, whom ye have set at naught."

Now that the victory is won Athene can afford to propitiate and soothe the injured pride of these ancient deities. "Hear me," she says, "and let not your bitter rancour shed its venom on this land. Ye were not defeated; the vote was equal, and the issue was decided by a higher power. And ye shall have a dwelling with me, even here, in this my home, and the sons of Athens shall pay you honour and worship." The Furies at first turn a deaf ear to her entreaties, and renew their curses and threats. Athene makes a second appeal,

this time enforced by a veiled threat. "My trust is in Zeus," she says, "in whom Apollo trusted; and I alone hold the key to the chamber where his thunderbolts are stored. Yield, then, and consent to share with me in my high privileges as the divine guardian of Athens."

The fierce hearts of the Furies are not easily to be softened; they still breathe forth threatenings and slaughter, though now their menaces are vaguer and less direct. Athene is very wise and patient; she knows how hard it is for the aged to curb their resentment when they feel themselves slighted, but she is determined not to desist until she has gained her point. She plies the offended powers with soft flattery. "Ye are older and wiser than I," she says, "but suffer me to foretell that ye will one day be visited by longing for this land, if now ye refuse its gifts. Never shall ye find another place to honour you as ye shall be honoured at Athens. Bring not, then, the curse of home-bred strife among her valiant sons; never let their swords be turned against any, save only their country's foes. They come to you with full hands and full hearts; greet them, and bless them, that ye yourselves may be blessed."

Athene has conquered again. Like sweet waters springing up in some desert place, clothing its barrenness with verdure, better thoughts begin to rise in those stony natures. "Thou hast prevailed," says she who speaks for the rest; and already her

look is milder, softer her voice. "But say again, what shall my privilege be?" "All household blessings shall be wrought by thee." "And shall this right be mine for evermore?" "For ever and for ever; I have sworn it."

And now we are to witness a wondrous transformation. The dreadful Furies, who came hither as the ministers of ruin, armed with every attribute of terror, have now become a benignant power, in whose train every blessing springs. This change in their nature is marked by a change of name; up till this time they have been known among men as the Awful Goddesses, but thenceforth they will be addressed as the Kindly Goddesses. A dwelling is prepared for them in a holy cave at the foot of the Hill of Ares, fronting the Acropolis. Before they depart to their new home, the eldest of the sisters lifts up her hands, and pronounces this solemn blessing on the land of Attica: "Hear, O Sun, fountain of life and light, and shed thy selectest influence on this favoured soil. Let the earth yield her increase in rich abundance, and no blasting air ever breathe on olive-tree or vine or green ear. May springtime and harvest dance hand in hand, and never murrain touch your flocks and herds. And ye, my sisters the Fates, hear my prayer, that no untimely death may blight the promise of youth or maiden; let the happy flowering season ever be crowned by the glad fruit of marriage. Far from these walls be the fierce

clamour of civil strife; and ye, O citizens, dwell together in wealth and peace, safe in the shadow of Athene's wing."

Then she whose magic eloquence has wrought this miracle, the mighty daughter of Zeus, leads the way, and amid the steam of sacrifice, the flaring of torches, and the joyous shouts of the citizens, the Furies, now Furies no more, but friendly powers, enter their new abode beneath the hill.

Stories from Sophocles

I.—ANTIGONE

"Oh men of Thebes, this famous man behold,
Who coming here, a stranger to the gate
The Sphinx's fatal riddle did unfold,
And chosen King, as Saviour to the State,
So greatly ruled, and rose to such Renown
As not a King but envied: now by Fate
To such a Depth precipitated down
As not a Wretch but may commiserate.
Beholding which, and counselled by the wise,
. . . . . .
Deem not the wisest of To-morrow sure,
Nor fortunate account him till he dies."

ED. FITZGERALD, from SOPHOCLES.

AMONG the kingly houses of ancient Greece whose fortunes furnished a theme for the Athenian tragic poets, none was more conspicuous than the line of Cadmus, founder of Thebes. Raised high above the common lot of mortals by royal descent, and by many gifts of mind and character, they were singled out as the victims of heaven's anger for headstrong passion or stubborn pride. And here, as in the dynasty of Pelops, the sins of the fathers descend upon the children, involving the innocent with the guilty, and divert-

ing even the noblest qualities into the channels of misery and disaster. We have now to tell the story of a young and beautiful princess, who suffered for the offences of her kindred, and fell a martyr to the cause of duty and affection. But we must first sketch very briefly the events which lead up to this tragic history.

In the third generation from Cadmus, Laius, King of Thebes, was warned by an oracle that he was destined to be slain by his son. Disregarding the oracle, he continued to live with his wife, and in due time a son was born to him. Then, thinking to defeat the ends of heaven, he gave the child to one of his herdsmen, and bade him carry it to the lonely slopes of Cithæron, and leave it there to die. But first he pierced the child's ankles, and passed a thong through the wounds; for he thought that if anyone chanced to find the infant, thus disfigured, he would not care to save it and adopt it for his own. The man went his way to the summer pastures of Cithæron, carrying the little prince with him. There he chanced to meet another herdsman, tending cattle in the same district for Polybus, King of Corinth, and at this man's entreaty he gave up his living charge, to be carried as a welcome gift to Polybus and his wife, who were childless.

The King and Queen received the child, and brought him up as their own, naming him Œdipus, or Swell-Foot in memory of the wounds which he

had received from his cruel parents. Œdipus grew to manhood in all honour and worship, with no thought but that he was the true heir of Polybus. But one day his suspicions were aroused by a chance word, uttered in the heat of wine; and, failing to get any clear answer from his pretended parents, he went to Delphi to learn the secret of his birth. There he fared no better; for the god gave no reply to his question, but sent him away with these dreadful words ringing in his ears: "*Thou shalt slay thy father, and thou and all thy children shall be accursed.*" Still thinking that Polybus was his father, Œdipus determined never to set foot in Corinth again, and set out from Delphi to seek a new home in some distant land.

But Fate followed hard at his heels. He was passing on foot through one of the narrow valleys of Parnassus when he met an old man driving in a chariot, who called to him roughly to make way. A hot dispute arose, blows were exchanged, and when Œdipus left the spot, the old man, who was no other than his father Laius, and all his attendants, save one, were lying dead by the roadside, slain by the hand of Œdipus. Then he came to Thebes, which was at this time held in terror by the Sphinx, a monster with a woman's head, the body of a lion, and the wings of a bird, who sat on a high place in the city, proposing a riddle to all comers, and devouring those who were unable to answer. Œdipus solved the riddle, and

the Sphinx flung herself from her rock, and perished; whereupon the Thebans, in gratitude, made him their king. In due time he married, and became the father of two sons and two daughters. Many years passed away, and the fame of Œdipus as a wise and mighty king spread far and wide, when suddenly a great pestilence fell upon Thebes, and in the inquiry which followed the whole truth was revealed. Learning who he was, and that he had slain his father, Œdipus in horror blinded himself. His sons, Eteocles and Polynices, banished him from Thebes, and Œdipus departed to Athens after laying this curse upon them, *that they should divide their heritage by the sword.* Before long his words were fulfilled: the young princes quarrelled, Polynices was driven out, and Eteocles remained as sole King of Thebes. Polynices went to Argos, and gathered an army, at the head of which he laid siege to Thebes. In the final assault, led by seven champions against the seven gates of the city, the Argives were repulsed, and the seven champions slain, Eteocles and Polynices falling by each other's hand. The throne now passed to Creon, uncle of the slain brothers; and it is at this point that our story begins.

I

Dawn is breaking over the ancient walls of Thebes, bringing a glad message of joy and triumph

to her citizens, after the long agony of the siege. The foe has fled in the night; all peril is past; and with the first ray of sunrise every door is opened, and young and old throng into the streets, to pour out their thankful hearts in gratitude to the gods for this great relief, with sacrifice and dance and song.

But there is one who takes no part in the general thanksgiving—Antigone, daughter of Œdipus, and sister of Eteocles and Polynices. She stands musing in a solitary spot in the precincts of the royal palace, and her soul is consumed with sorrow and anger. Presently a light footstep is heard approaching, and she turns to greet Ismene, the younger daughter of Œdipus, who has come in answer to a message from her elder sister. After an affectionate embrace Antigone speaks in a voice tremulous with passion: "Dear sister, when shall we see the end of our woes? Never, I fear, till our whole house is buried in shame and sorrow and ruin. Hast thou heard the news?" "I have heard nothing," answers Ismene, "since that sad day when our brothers were slain by each other's sword. I know that the Argives have fled—that is all." "Thou knowest not, then," cries Antigone, "that Creon has published an edict, forbidding anyone to give Polynices the rites of burial. Eteocles sleeps in honour in the tomb of his fathers, but Polynices is to lie where he fell, unwept, unburied, a feast for dogs and vultures. And he who dares

to disobey shall be stoned to death in the sight of all the people. Now, therefore, it is time for thee to show whether thou art the true daughter of a king." "But what power have I," asks the wondering Ismene, "to make or mar in this matter?" "Wilt thou help me to do it?" "To do what?" "Wilt thou help me to bury him?" "To bury him, when Creon has forbidden it?" "Yes; to bury him, my brother and thine; if thou wilt not help me, I will do it alone."

With terror written on her face Ismene entreats her sister to give up this rash purpose. "Think," she urges, "of our father's awful end; think of our mother, how she fell by her own hand, overpowered by grief and shame. But yesterday our brothers were cut off, and on their memory lies a double stain.[1] And shall we crown the miseries of our race by the wilful sacrifice of our own lives? What can two weak women do against the might and majesty of a king? The dead will pardon me, for they know that I am helpless."

Antigone replies with cold scorn. "I will not urge thee further," she says; "I want no unwilling helpers. Set the law of man above the law of God if thou wilt, but him I will bury. I welcome death with honour. After life's fitful fever I shall dwell for ever with him I love, and heaven will sanctify my offence."

[1] Suicide and murder. To be slain by a kinsman was regarded by the ancient Greeks as a species of suicide.

The weak and gentle nature of Ismene, though full of tenderness and kindly affection, is incapable of sharing, or even of understanding, the lofty ideals of Antigone. "'Tis not in me," she says, "to defy authority." "Do thou, then," answers her sister, "make peace with thy conscience as thou canst, I go to bury my brother." "At least do the deed in secret," urges Ismene, "and I will help thee to hide it." "Nay; publish it abroad," says Antigone; "thy silence will only make me hate thee more."

And so the sisters part—one to tread the perilous path of duty, the other to await the issue in silence and tears.

II

A group of aged Theban nobles is standing in the audience-chamber of the palace, in obedience to a peremptory summons which has called them hither to confer with Creon, the new monarch of Thebes. After a short interval he enters, and, having received the homage of the venerable senators, proceeds to lay down the principles on which he intends to rule. "I have summoned you," he says, "nobles of Thebes, knowing you to have been ever loyal servants of the house of Cadmus. Now that royal sceptre, which is the sternest touchstone of character, has passed into my hands, and I am resolved to wield it for the public good without fear or favour. No thoughts of private affection, no claim

of kindred, however close, shall deter me from the strait path of public duty. Therefore to Eteocles, who fell fighting for his country, I have given honourable burial, with all the pomp and ceremony befitting his rank and merits; but Polynices, who led an army against us, and threatened his native city with fire and slaughter, shall be given as a prey to the fowls of the air. Let no tear be shed, no sound of mourning be uttered, over the corpse of that traitor. Mark well my bidding, and see that it be obeyed, as ye shall answer for it with your lives."

The elders murmur a reluctant acquiescence in the King's stern injunction; in their hearts they condemn the sacrilege, but long habits of reverence forbid any open expression of dissent.

Creon is about to give his audience another lesson in State policy, when the sound of iron-shod sandals is heard ringing down the corridor which leads to the chamber of audience. The door is opened, giving admittance to a man of awkward and clownish figure, who approaches the King with a clumsy reverence. He is one of those appointed to watch the body of Polynices, and is a bustling, foolish fellow, who shows signs of great excitement and alarm. "My lord," he begins, when he has received permission to speak, "if I am out of breath, 'tis not with the speed of my coming, for, indeed, my heels were winged with lead. Many a time my thoughts gave me pause, waging a fierce

debate within me thus: '*Go back, rash man; hast thou a mind for a halter? What, lingering still? And if Creon learn this from another, how shalt thou escape whipping?*' Thus, pulled one way and another by my fears, I came slowly to my journey's end, and so a short way was made long. But at last I gave my vote to come to thee and tell my tale. I cling fast to this one hope: a man cannot suffer aught but what is his fate."

"Fellow, let be thine idle chat," says the King, "and say what thou hast to tell." "Nay; let me first clear myself," replies the man, full of his own fears. "I did not do the deed, and I know not the doer. I am not to blame." "Speak out, man," commands Creon; "tell thy news, and be gone." "Hear, then," says the watchman, speaking slowly and unwillingly: "some hand has sprinkled dust upon the corpse,[1] and paid the wonted rites of burial." "How sayest thou?" exclaims Creon. "What man hath dared to do this deed?" "Nay; I know not," answers the clown; "he who did it, whoever he be, left no trace behind him. We found the body covered with a thin layer of dust, and there was no sign that dog or any beast of prey had been near him. Then a clamour of loud and angry words arose among us, one guard accusing another, and at last we almost came to blows. After that we began searching again, but all to

[1] In cases of necessity a handful of dust thrown upon a corpse was considered as satisfying all the claims of piety.

no purpose. As we stood gazing in each other's faces someone whispered: 'We must tell the King.' And at that word we were all struck dumb with terror. But there was no help for it, so we drew lots, and I, luckless man, was chosen to carry the news to thee—news not more welcome for me to bring than for thee to hear."

"My King," says an aged senator after a solemn pause, "bethink thee, is not this the hand of God?" "Peace!" answers Creon in hot and angry tones. "Will ye tell me that heaven's favour rests on a villain who came, in defiance of all law, to overthrow the temples and waste the sacred land of Thebes? No; this is some secret plot, hatched by a rebel crew who have long been murmuring against the house of Cadmus. They have bribed these caitiffs to set my will at naught. Now, fellow, mark my words," he adds, addressing the watchman: "as sure as there is a God in heaven, except ye find the author of this crime, and set him face to face with me, ye shall die by a long and lingering death, that all the world may know what it is to earn the wages of sin."

The man, though in mortal terror at the savage threats of Creon, is a born jester, and must have his joke, should he hang for it. "May I speak a word before I go?" he asks. "I want no more words from thee," answers Creon; "they are an offence." "An offence to thy ears or to thy soul?" asks the clown again. "Out on thy babble, rascal!

Get thee gone." "He who did it hurts thy soul—I hurt but thy ears," replies the watchman as he retires. "Praise be to heaven," he mutters to himself when he is well out of hearing, "for this happy escape! Now catch the criminal or not, as you can; but if ever you see me here again, I give you leave to do your worst to me."

III

In a lonely spot surrounded by low hills, not far from the walls of Thebes, lies the dishonoured body of Polynices. It is the hour of the fierce noonday heat, and far and wide no living creature is to be seen, save that a few black specks, high up in the throbbing air, mark where the vultures are hovering over their expected prey. Gradually they descend, wheeling nearer and nearer to the corpse; then they draw off again, and, alighting at a safe distance, sit perched like foul sentinels on the neighbouring hills. Looking round, we perceive the cause of their alarm in the person of a young and graceful woman approaching with hasty steps the place where the body lies, and carrying in her hands a brazen vase. Now she is standing over the lifeless form, gazing on it in an attitude of utter sorrow. Her face is closely veiled, but soon we recognise the voice of Antigone, as she sends forth a loud and piercing cry. "Now, curse on the dastard who

Antigone strewing Dust upon the Body of her Brother

Photo Mansell

has wrought this foul deed, and undone the work of my hands!" she cries, perceiving that the dust which she had sprinkled on the body has been carefully brushed away; for this is her second visit to the dead.

Meanwhile a change has come over the face of the sky; the sun is hidden from sight, and a sudden tempest, sweeping down from the heart of the mountains, descends upon the valley, blotting out the view in a swirling cloud of dust. When the whirlwind has passed the form of Antigone appears again; stooping down, she fills her hands with dust, and lets it fall on the body. Three times the ceremony is repeated, and three times she lifts the urn, pouring a libation in honour to the dead.

Her task is ended, and she is preparing to go, when a rough grasp is laid upon her arm, and a rude voice breaks in upon her pure and hallowed thoughts. "Ho, mistress, is it thou?" cries the ruffian, who is no other than the clown who brought the message to Creon. "Come away, come away. We have seen thy fine doings from a snug corner where we lay, behind yonder hill. Thou art fairly taken in the snare. Oh, this will be fine news for Creon!"

IV

The King is still in deep consultation with the senators when, to the astonishment of all those

present, Antigone is brought in, closely guarded by the watchman. The man has recovered all his self-assurance, and speaks in the tone of one who is confident of praise and reward. "My lord," he says, "when I left you, I swore I would never look on your face again. But a man should not swear to anything, for he never knows what an hour may bring forth. Behold this maiden; she it was who gave burial to the dead. There was no drawing of lots here. I found her myself; she is my prize; take her, and do with her as thou wilt; I have done my part."

Then at the command of the King he describes the scene which we have already witnessed, dwelling on every detail, and bestowing liberal praise on himself. "We caught her in the very act," he says, "and she confessed that this was the second time she had been there. Well, I am glad to have saved my own bones; yet 'tis pity too, for she is a comely maid." When his report is ended he receives permission to depart, and judge and culprit are left face to face.

Bending a stern eye on the maiden, Creon bids her say whether she is guilty or not guilty of this act. "I did it," answers Antigone calmly; "I deny it not." "And didst thou know that I had forbidden it?" "I knew." "And thou hast dared to disobey?"

All the pride of her race speaks in the eye of the youthful princess, and high and clear is her tone as

she returns this lofty answer: "Not from Zeus came that command to me, nor from Justice, who sits throned among the gods below. There is an unwritten law, which cannot fail; it was born of the breath of God, and lives not for yesterday, nor for to-day, but for ever. That law I have obeyed, for I am sure that no monarch's voice can annul the everlasting statutes of heaven. Take my life if thou wilt; 'tis a burden which I would gladly lay down; but to live with a sacred duty unperformed—*that* is a shame which I could never brook. And if thou thinkest that I am acting foolishly, be assured that I would rather have my folly than thy wisdom."

"She is her father's true child," whispers a senator, standing near the King; "she has the very look and voice of Œdipus." Creon has caught the words, and, answering them, he says: "Yes; I know her pride and the naughtiness of her heart. But there are means to curb these haughty spirits; and if she will not bend, she shall break. Insolent in thine act, and in thy words more insolent, thou shalt die—thou, and thy sister with thee; ye should die though ye were nearer to me than my nearest and dearest—call me woman, else. Go, fetch the other," he added, addressing an attendant; "I saw her just now within the palace, and treason was writ on her face."

"Wilt thou do more than slay me?" asks Antigone. "No; nothing more," replies Creon; "thy

life is all I want." "Then let it be done quickly," answers the princess. "Why prolong this idle brawl? Thy ways are not my ways; but I know that I have chosen the nobler path." "Is it noble," demands Creon, "to confound the patriot with the traitor, and pay them the same honours?" "Death discharges all debts," she answers; "a generous spirit wars not with the dead." "A foe is a foe, dead or alive," retorts the King. "In my heart is no room for hate," says Antigone, "but only for love." "Then carry thy love to the grave," comes the cruel answer, "and love the dead. While I live no woman shall govern me."

A sound of low sobbing is now heard, and Ismene is led into the room. "Ah! here is the other serpent who has been draining my life-blood in secret," says Creon. "Now tell me, wast thou privy to this burial or not?" "Half the guilt is mine," answers Ismene in a low voice—adding, with a timid look at Antigone, "if she allows me to share it." "Thy claim is false," says Antigone coldly; "thou hadst neither part nor lot in the matter." "Oh, let me share thy burden," pleads that meek and gentle spirit, strong in the passive courage of affection; "let me die with thee." "Thou hast chosen thy part," retorts Antigone; "there stands thy friend"—pointing to Creon—"live thy life with him." At this bitter taunt Ismene's tears flow afresh; she flings herself at her sister's feet, and, clasping her knees, implores, with sobs and low cries,

to be allowed to drink with her of the bitter cup. Not without a struggle, Antigone repulses her; while Creon, who has been a cold spectator of the scene, remarks scornfully: "This girl has lately lost her wits, I think, but the other was mad from her birth. Now away with them both! Summon the guard, and let them be kept close prisoners till they are led forth to die." Then the sisters are led away to the dungeon of the castle, while Creon remains to give orders for their immediate execution.

V

But the sentence is not to remain unchallenged. Hardly have the prison doors closed upon the maidens when a youth, whose garb and bearing show him to be of the highest rank, is seen hurrying up the steep road which leads to the main gate of the castle. It is Hæmon, Creon's only surviving son, who, while occupied in some pressing business at the other end of the city, has heard of the doom pronounced on his cousins. Antigone is his affianced bride, and he is coming, winged by love and fear, to plead her cause with the tyrant his father.

"Greeting, my son," says the King as Hæmon enters. "Say, art thou come in wrath, or like a dutiful son, whose will is his father's, whatever be the issue?" Hæmon, who knows the despotic temper of his father, begins in a submissive tone. "Father," he says, "in this, as in all else, I will be

guided by thy better wisdom." Creon smiles approval at this speech, and proceeds to deliver a long sermon on the value of obedience and subordination. A loyal child, he says, will follow his father in every act, and share all his loves and hates. This maiden has defied the power of the King, and Hæmon does well to cast her off: an unworthy passion only ends in loathing and cold aversion. No private affection, no claim of kindred, however close, can be allowed to outweigh public duty. If a king cannot keep order in his own house, how shall he look for obedience abroad? Authority must be obeyed, right or wrong. In peace or in war, anarchy is the root of all evil. After these sounding truisms, which are hailed by the courtiers with nods and murmurs of approval, Creon lets slip a phrase, in which all the littleness of his nature is instantly unmasked. "To be defied by a woman!" he exclaims; "that will I never endure."

Hæmon has listened patiently to the harangue, and he replies with modesty and respect. "Far be it from me," he says, "to dispute the wisdom of thy words. Yet hear me in my turn, and consider if there be any portion of public prudence in me also. 'Tis my part to be all eye and all ear for thee, and to keep faithful watch in thy interest. I can judge the temper of the commons better than thou, for the public voice dies in terror before ever it reaches thy throne. Now I know that there is much murmuring against the punishment decreed for this

maiden. Pity and sorrow is in every heart that she, so brave, so loving, and so faithful, should die by a cruel death. Beware, then, of the storm which is gathering against thee in yonder city; give way in time to the force which, if thou resist too long, will sweep thee utterly away. He is not wise who thinks that all knowledge and all power are in his hands alone."

"My King," says a senator, on whom Hæmon's eloquence has made a deep impression, "methinks there is much reason in what he says." But the stubborn temper of the tyrant has taken fire at the first hint of opposition. During the whole of Hæmon's speech he has restrained himself with difficulty, and now he bursts out into a flame of anger. "Shall I, at my age," he asks, "be schooled by a stripling like thee?" "The aged," replies Hæmon, "may sometimes learn a lesson from the young." "A lesson of disobedience, it would seem," retorts Creon. "No; a lesson of righteousness," answers his son. "Is it righteous to show favour to a rebel?" "The voice of Thebes gives her another name." "Shall Thebes give law to me, her lawful king?" "Nay, now thou speakest like a very child." "I am the State; my will, the people's law." "Then seek some desert place, and rule alone."

The debate grows hotter and hotter, taunt clashing against taunt like steel against steel. At length, Hæmon, convinced that his father is immovable,

cries in despair: "Then she must die—but she shall not die alone!" Hereupon Creon, who takes the words for a threat, falls into a fit of outrageous fury, and, calling to a guard, orders him to bring Antigone from her prison. "She shall die forthwith," he thunders — "here, at this instant, by her bridegroom's side." "Never!" answers Hæmon; "never think it! I will not look upon her death; nor shalt thou ever see my face again; let others brook thy frenzy if they can." And he rushes from the room.

"My King," says one of the senators, "I fear some great evil will arise from the wild passion of this youth." "Let him do or dare what he will," answers Creon, "he shall not save these maidens from their fate." "And dost thou indeed purpose to slay them both?" asks another of the nobles. At this hint others join their voices in intercession for Ismene. After some demur Creon yields to their entreaty, and consents to spare the younger sister. "But the other—Antigone," asks one of those present — "how is she to die?" "I will carry her," answers Creon, "to a lonely place, and hide her, living, in a rocky cavern. A little food shall be set there—only so much as religion commands; and there she may put up prayers to the nether powers, if haply they will save her. There she shall learn, too late, that there is no profit in reverence to the dead."

VI

Outside the palace doors a crowd is gathered, waiting in hushed expectation for the coming of Antigone. Soon she appears, attended by an armed escort, and a low murmur of sorrow and sympathy is heard among the crowd. It is a sight to rend the hardest heart: there she stands, in her beauty and her bloom, destined already as the bride of Death. She is no common martyr—no withered devotee, with a body wasted by privation and suffering and a soul long weaned from the thoughts of earth—but a young and lovely woman, instinct with love and life. Nature calls to her with a thousand voices, bidding her to live and enjoy; but a tyrant has spoken, and she must die.

Relieved for the moment from Creon's hated presence she can afford to show the softer side of her character, and shed some natural tears over her untimely fate. "Behold me, my countrymen," she cries, "bound on my last journey, taking my last look on the light of day. Is not my fate like that of my ancestress, Niobe, who wept over her slaughtered children till the gods in pity turned her into stone? And there stands she still, among the lonely hills, with tears never failing by day or by night."

The crowd is thrust back by the King's guards, and Antigone finds herself standing alone among the cold and formal senators, whose presence only

brings home to her the awful loneliness of her lot. From them she finds but cold comfort. "My child," says a white-bearded elder, bent double with age, "thou has gone to the farthest verge of daring, and fallen against the throne of Justice with a grievous fall. Perchance thou art atoning for thy father's sin." "Oh! thou hast touched me to the quick," wails this hapless child of the house of Œdipus. "'Tis the curse, the curse of our race, which has blighted me from my birth. There they await me in the cold house of death, father and mother, and my brothers twain, all marked by the same hideous brand, dishonoured in life, dishonoured in death."

In the midst of her lamentations she is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Creon, who comes to urge his myrmidons to the completion of their hateful task. "Enough of these moans and tears!" he says harshly. "Away with her to the appointed place; she will have time enough to weep there."

The sight of her destroyer steels Antigone against the soft visitings of self-pity. For the last time she speaks, and now her tone is stern and proud, though infinitely sad. "I go," she says, "to mine own, the kinsmen for whom I have laid down my life; they will give me that comfort which is denied me here. My only offence is that I have loved too much, therefore am I brought to this state, scorned of men, and abandoned of heaven. Now, if this be fair in the eyes of the gods, when

I have passed the gates of death, I will confess my crime; but if the wrong is with those who condemned me, then may they suffer no worse than they have made me suffer."

With that last bitter curse, edged with keen irony, the haughty princess is led away to her living tomb.

VII

Once more the King is closeted with his council, striving by close application to the affairs of State to silence the still, small voice of conscience, which begins to make itself heard within him now that the first heat of passion is over. On the faces of his courtiers he reads gloom and anxiety, and he himself is haunted by an uneasy sense of approaching evil.

Before long these vague forebodings take definite shape. In the midst of a long harangue, in which he talks much of the divine right of kings and the majesty of the law, Creon is interrupted by the entrance of an usher, who announces that Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes, is desiring admittance. "Bid him enter," says Creon; and the venerable seer is conducted into his presence. "Welcome, thou faithful counsellor of the house of Cadmus," says the King; "what news hast thou brought?" "Ill news for thee, my son," answers Tiresias in a voice trembling with age: "by every sign of my

prophetic art I know that heaven's anger is kindled against thee. As I sat on my ancient seat of augury, where I listen to the voice of birds, I heard a din of hideous discord among them, for the spirit of mutual hate has entered into the very fowls of the air. Then I made trial by burnt sacrifice at the altar; but the flame smouldered sullenly, and sank, and the flesh of the victims remained unconsumed. The whole land is filled with pollution from the unburied corpse of Polynices; therefore the gods are wroth, and will vouchsafe no sign. This is the punishment which thy sin has brought; do thou make amends, while yet there is time. Give the dead his due, and thou and thy land shall yet be blest."

But the evil spirit has entered into Creon again, and he answers with scorn and defiance. He is possessed by the foolish notion of a plot to undermine his authority, and he pretends to believe that Tiresias has been bribed to lend his voice to the conspiracy. "Brave prophecies are these," he says; "no doubt ye find your profit in them. Grow rich at my cost if ye will; but ye shall not buy a grave for that man—no, not though the very eagles of Zeus should carry his flesh to the heavenly throne; for I know that no mortal hath power to defile the gods. And take heed to thyself, lest greed of gain should bring thee to harm."

At these wild and blasphemous words the prophet lifts up his hands, as if he were about to empty all

the vials of his anger on the head of that misguided man. But for the moment he checks himself, and speaks in sorrow and pity. "I bring thee," he says, "a gift beyond price—the gift of wisdom." "'Tis a good gift," replies Creon, with a sneer. "How much wast thou paid for it?" At this vile taunt the wrath of Tiresias breaks all bounds, and he bursts forth into a terrible denunciation, his voice gaining depth and power as he proceeds. "Mark well my words," he says: "before yonder sun has reached the end of his course[1] thou shalt give a child of thine own house to pay the price of the dead, because thou hast given a living soul a harbour in the grave, and keepest on earth one whose portion is with the gods below—a corpse unburied, unblest, unhallowed. The avenging Furies are on thy track, to drive thee into the pit which thou hast dug. Yet a little while, and the voice of wailing shall be heard in thy house—then shalt thou know whether I speak with venal lips. And all the cities are arming against thee, whose slaughtered sons thou hast given as a prey to beasts and birds, bearing the taint of pollution to every hearth. These are my words, and in thy heart thou shalt feel their sting." Then, taking the hand of the boy who leads him, the seer departs to his own home.

Creon is sorely shaken, and he sees his own

[1] In the original Tiresias speaks of *days*; but the action of the play anticipates the prophecy.

terror reflected in the eyes of his counsellors. "'Tis hard to yield," he mutters; "yet I know that this man has never prophesied falsely." Perceiving him to be deeply moved, the elders urge him with warning and entreaty, and at length he yields. "What must I do?" he asks. "Go quickly," answers the leader of the council, "and set free the maiden, and give burial to the body of Polynices." "Well, if it must be, it must," groans Creon. And now, flinging all reserve aside, he shows his fearful anxiety by the hurry and fever of his orders. "Make haste!" he shouts to his attendants; "bring axes in your hands, and follow me to the grave." With that he is gone, and willing helpers go with him to aid in the work of rescue.

VIII

In the royal palace the Queen Eurydice is left alone with her handmaidens, waiting in anxious suspense for the return of Creon from his errand of mercy. Trembling between hope and fear, she goes to the shrine of Pallas to pour out her full heart in prayer. Just as she is drawing the bolts of the gate a strange voice reaches her ear, and she catches the name of Hæmon, her son. The mother's heart is quick to take alarm; something in the tone of the speaker sends a cold pang of terror through her breast; and she sinks back

fainting into the arms of her attendants. When she is somewhat recovered she enters the hall of audience, where the sound of voices is still heard; and there she finds a messenger, just arrived at the palace, who is telling his story to a few aged retainers of the Court, left behind on the departure of Creon. Reading sorrow and dismay on their faces, she divines at once that some dire calamity has happened; but, checking her feelings, with a quick, gasping sob she turns to the messenger, and implores him to tell his tale. A few words suffice to let her know the worst; for a moment she stands motionless, as if horror had turned her to stone; then, without word or sound, she glides like a spectre from the room.

Following the footsteps of Creon we shall learn the meaning of this moving scene. On leaving the palace, he first made his way to the place where the body of Polynices, now horribly mangled by bird and beast, was lying. The dreadful relics were reverently collected, and burnt, with all due rites, on the spot where they had lain. Then, after burying the ashes and raising a mound of earth over them, they hastened to the cavern where Antigone had been immured. As they drew near to the place, they perceived that the stones which had blocked the mouth of the cavern were newly torn away, and within the rocky vault itself a man's voice was heard, raised in accents of heartrending anguish. "'Tis the voice of my son!" cried Creon,

and rushed distractedly into the vault. What a sight was there awaiting that miserable father! There stood Hæmon, holding in his arms the lifeless form of Antigone, round whose neck was still seen the noose of knotted linen by which she had hanged herself, and all the cavern rang with his fearful cries. Creon drew near, and called to him in wailing tones: "Oh, my son, thy art beside thyself! Come forth. Speak to thy father, O Hæmon, my son, my son!" But the boy glared at him with wild eyes, spat in his face, and, letting the body of his dead bride slip to the ground, drew his sword, and rushed upon his father to slay him. Creon turned, and fled; and then Hæmon pointed the sword against his own breast, leaned upon it, and drove it deep into his side. So there he bowed and fell; there he lay down in death, clasping the cold form of his love in a last embrace, and pressed her pale cheek with his dying lips, which left a crimson stain.

IX

With tottering footsteps, like one who staggers under a heavy load, Creon returns to his palace, followed by the bier on which Hæmon's body is carried. But a fresh blow awaits him; as he draws near the gate he learns from a messenger that his wife, Eurydice, has died by her own hand. When she heard the tidings of her son's violent death,

she went straight to the altar where every day the King's household assembled for worship, and, seizing a sacrificial knife which lay there, plunged it into her breast. And with her dying breath she cursed her husband, as the author of all her woes.

And so the curtain falls on the forlorn figure of Creon. He is utterly crushed and undone; wife, son, and she who was to have been his daughter —all have perished, and he is guilty of their blood. There is no ray of hope left for his darkened spirit; henceforth existence for him will be a living death. Less happy than his victims, he is doomed to drag out his days in misery, as an awful warning against the folly of wilfulness and pride

II.—THE LAST DAYS OF HERCULES

"So should his soul on earth by toils be tried,
Then should long Peace betide,
Then in high Heaven for aye
Safe should he scale the blest abodes,
The ever-blooming Hebe for his bride;
Feasting in one eternal marriage-day
Inmate of Jove's celestial bowers, and homed among the Gods."

PINDAR.

YOU are now to hear how Hercules met his end, and of the sorrows of the gentle lady, Deianira, his wife. This lady was the daughter of Œneus, King of Ætolia, and in early youth she was wooed by the river-god Acheloüs. But she dreaded this strange suitor, and vowed that she would rather die than become his bride; for he appeared to her in monstrous shapes, and filled her maiden spirit with loathing and dread. Now, it chanced that Hercules, then in the first bloom of manhood, was just at that time passing through Ætolia in the course of his wanderings; and he met Acheloüs, and fought with him, and overthrew him. When the battle was over, Hercules sought the hand of Deianira, and won her for his wife.

Hercules brought his wife home to Tiryus, an ancient city of Argos, where Eurystheus was King,

and here several children were born to him. But Deianira saw little of her heroic husband, who was doomed by the jealousy of Hera to lead a wandering life and perform many heavy labours. Many years had passed away, when it happened that Iphitus, son of Eurytus, King of Œchalia in Eubœa, was slain by Hercules in a fit of madness. As a penance for this deed Hercules was condemned to serve for twelve months as the slave of Omphale, Queen of Lydia, and he was compelled to obey; for the command came from Zeus, his father, king of gods and men. Before his departure he placed Deianira and her children, for safe keeping, with Ceyx, his kinsman, King of Trachis. Then he disappeared, and neither his wife nor her children knew whither he was bound. But before he went he swore, on his return, to be revenged on Eurytus, who had brought this new trial upon him.

I

Fifteen months have passed away since the departure of Hercules from Trachis, and Deianira is sitting among her handmaids, pouring out her sorrows for the hundredth time into their sympathetic ears. She is a kind and gentle mistress, beloved by her whole household, and more than one sigh is heard, more than one eye is moist, as she dwells on her sad story. "'Tis an old saying," she observes: "*Call no man happy or unhappy till*

he is dead; but I know all that sorrow can teach me before yet I have passed my prime. All my girlhood was darkened by the importunity of my wild suitor, Acheloüs; and when Hercules saved me from that hateful wooer, and made me his bride, I, who was the envy of all the maidens of Ætolia, found my pillow lined with thorns. Since the hour when Hercules brought me to his home I have never had a moment of peace. Through all the long years of toil and peril, when he was condemned to serve an unworthy master,[1] I lived the life of a widow. My husband was ever abroad, encompassed by terrors, and I was left at home to weep. And when at length he had performed the last of his labours, and I thought that my troubles were over, my state became worse than ever. For since the day when my lord slew Iphitus, I and my children have been dwelling in Trachis, strangers in a strange land; while he is gone, no one knows whither, and for fifteen months I have had no sign from him. Before he left Trachis he gave me a tablet, on which I read these words, traced by a mysterious hand: *Thy trials are almost ended.* Ended, methinks, they are. But how? Alas! I fear —I fear it is by his death."

"Lady," answers an aged nurse, who stands high in the confidence of her mistress, "waste not thy soul away in fruitless tears, but hear a word of counsel from one who loves thee. Behold, thou

[1] Eurystheus, at whose bidding Hercules performed his twelve labours.

hast many stout sons, why dost thou not send one of them forth to seek tidings of his father? See, here comes Hyllus, thy eldest-born, and the fittest to perform this duty." As she speaks, a tall and stately youth enters the room. "Well met, my son!" says Deianira, gazing on him with fond and loving eyes; "'twas of thee that we were just speaking. Thy father——" "I bring tidings of him, if rumours can be trusted," interrupts Hyllus. "Where is he? How fares he?" asks his mother eagerly. "In Eubœa, preparing to make war on his old enemy, Eurytus," replies Hyllus. "In Eubœa?" repeats Deianira in excited tones. "This is the very place mentioned in the oracle as the scene of his last trial. If he survives this, he is to end his days in peace; if not—— But up, my child; hasten to his aid; he has reached the very crisis of his fortunes." "I go, dear mother," answers Hyllus. And after a hurried farewell he leaves the room to prepare for his journey, and Deianira is left alone again with her maidens.

To soothe the agitation of her spirits she calls to a young girl who is sitting among the rest, busy with her distaff, and says: "Child, leave thy spinning for a while, and sing us that pretty song which the old minstrel made, telling of Hercules and his labours. It is a happy and cheerful strain, and, perhaps, will bring some comfort to my troubled heart." The maiden takes her harp, and sings as she is bidden; and when the last sweet notes of her

voice have died away her mistress looks at her kindly, and says with a sad smile, "Thy song bids me banish care, dear child; but what knowest thou of care, in thy maiden innocence? Thy life is like a tender flower, breathing its sweetness in some cool, sheltered spot, where neither noonday heat nor rain nor storm can mar its virgin grace. But when thou hast awakened from the dreams of thy girlhood, then shalt thou learn the sorrow, pain, and anguish which it is a woman's portion to bear." The handmaid gazes with tearful and troubled eyes at her kind mistress, whose words she but half understands; and Deianira proceeds, speaking now to the whole company. "Dear friends," she says, "my heart is torn between hope and fear." Then, taking a tablet inscribed with mysterious signs from her bosom, she proceeds: "It is written here that, for good or for evil, my husband's labours are near their end. Such is the import of these dark tokens which Hercules declared to me when he set out on his last journey. The words, he told me, were spoken by Jove's oracle, the prophetic oak-tree in old Dodona. And he made division of his lands among his sons, and set apart a portion for the widow's dower, 'for it may be,' he said, 'that I shall not return alive. When a year and three months have passed, I shall know my fate.' The hour is now at hand, and with it comes the torturing thought: how shall I end my days—as widow or as wife?"

"Take heart, dear lady," says the nurse. "See, here comes one who surely brings good news, for he wears an olive wreath on his brow." As she speaks an old man, a native of Trachis, is ushered in. "Good news indeed!" he cries, taking up the nurse's words. "He lives! He lives! He is on his way to this land, crowned with the spoils of victory!" "From whom didst thou learn this?" asks Deianira. "From his own faithful herald, Lichas," answers the man. "He could not get away from the crowd which surrounded him. The whole people of Trachis were besetting him with questions, so I e'en slipped away, and hurried hither, to be the first to bring the joyful message, and win favour and reward from thee."

At the mention of Lichas, who is well known to her, Deianira's doubts vanish. Relieved from the long burden of anxiety her elastic nature bounds upward with sudden joy. "Rejoice, rejoice," she cries, "all ye who love the name of Hercules! Let the whole house ring with dance and song, for the sun of gladness has risen on us again!"

II

Lichas is now seen approaching the house, followed by a train of captive maidens, and Deianira stands ready to greet him as he enters. "Hail to thee, faithful herald of Hercules!" she

says. "Long have we waited for thy coming, but now I trust that our sorrow is turned into joy. Now tell me quickly, what news of Hercules?" "He lives," answers Lichas—"at least when I left him he was well and strong." "And where did you leave him?" inquires Deianira. "On a headland of Eubœa," is the reply; "he is building an altar to Zeus, in fulfilment of a vow which he made to Zeus when he made war on Eurytus."

Deianira now learns for the first time the whole story of her husband's fortunes since he left her. Hercules, when a guest in the house of Eurytus, had been grossly insulted by his host, who taunted him with his servitude to Eurystheus, boasted of his son's superior skill in archery, and finally thrust him out of doors. Some time after this Iphitus, son of Eurytus, came to Tiryus in search of some horses which had strayed from his father's pastures, and then it was that Hercules revenged himself on the father by slaying the son. When his year of penance as the slave of Omphale, Queen of Lydia, was over, he collected an army, sailed to Eubœa, and, having defeated Eurytus, gave up his country, which was called Œchalia, to fire and sword.

Such is the story as told by Lichas, but we shall presently see that he is telling only half the truth. Deianira remains silent for a moment, and seems still troubled by some haunting care. "What ails thee, my Queen?" asks one of her maidens. "Surely no thought is left to mar the

gladness of this hour?" "Nay; I am glad—I am very glad," answers Deianira; "and yet 'tis not well to rejoice overmuch, for sorrow ever dogs the heels of intemperate joy. And my heart is torn with pity when I look at these captive maidens, lately, no doubt, the daughters of happy homes, now made houseless and fatherless by the hard lot of war, and condemned to bondage in a strange land." Then turning to one of the captives, who is distinguished from the rest by her singular beauty and by her mien of utter sadness, she addresses her in kind and pitying tones: "Poor child! tell me, who art thou, and who were thy parents? Art thou a maiden or a wife? I think a maiden, and surely of noble birth." Getting no answer from the maiden, who remains silent and downcast, Deianira appeals to Lichas: "Tell me, who is she? Of gentle breed, without doubt, for she alone among the others seems conscious of her fallen state."

Lichas parries the question, pretending that he knows nothing certain about the matter. "She has never spoken," he says, "since she left her home, but has wept unceasingly, like one utterly broken by sorrow." With true delicacy Deianira forbears to press her further, and is preparing to enter the house, whither Lichas is now moving with the captives, when she is detained by the old man who first brought the news of Hercules' coming—one of those officious meddlers whose loose tongue

is often the occasion of dire mischief. "Stay," says the fellow, "thou hast not yet heard all. This man has deceived thee. When I heard him speaking to the crowd in the city he told a very different story. It was not his year of servitude with Omphale, nor the death of Iphitus, which caused Hercules to make war on Eurytus, but his love for this girl, even her of whom thou wast asking just now. I can call a thousand witnesses to prove my words true if need be."

Deianira is terribly shocked. "Knowest thou her name?" she asks in a low and troubled voice. "Without doubt," answers the man. "'Tis a name of no mean note: she is Iole, daughter of Eurytus." "What shall I do?" cries Deianira distractedly. "'Twere best you summoned Lichas, and questioned him again," replies one of her attendants.

Even as she speaks the herald reappears from the house. "I am going back to my lord," he says, addressing the Queen. "Hast thou any message for him?" "But why this haste?" asks Deianira. "Thou hast much to tell me yet." "What wouldst thou know?" inquires Lichas. "Speak, and thou shalt hear." "Then say," says Deianira, looking hard at him, "who is this woman whom thou hast brought hither." "She is a native of Eubœa—that is all I know." At this second denial the old meddler who has caused all the trouble interposes again. "How darest thou," he exclaims, "deceive thy mistress thus?" "And how darest thou,"

answers Lichas angrily, "talk thus to me?" But a fool's tongue is not so easily silenced. "Didst thou not say," persists the mischief-maker, "that this was Iole, daughter of Eurytus, and that Hercules sought her long ago for his wife?" Lichas disdains to answer. "Who is this madman?" he asks, speaking to the Queen. "Send him away; I have no time to waste on his idle prate."

But the wife's jealous fears are not thus to be laid at rest. "I adjure thee," she cries, "by all that is most holy to tell me the truth. What dost thou fear? Am I not Hercules' lawful wife? Thinkest thou that I dread a rival in his heart? I am not so weak. But thou art playing a sorry part, whether thou hast learned it from him or taught it to thyself. And what is the use of this mystery? The truth will be revealed whether thou hide it or not. Speak, then, and quit this cowardly dissimulation."

Thus solemnly adjured Lichas confesses that the old man has spoken truly. "But think not," he adds, "that I practised this deception at my master's bidding. The fault, if fault it was, is all my own. I feared to wound thy heart, and, therefore, I deceived thee."

"'Tis well," answers Deianira; "there is no harm done. Now come with me, that I may give thee a loving message to my lord, and a gift in recompense for that which he has sent to me: it were not meet that thou shouldst return to him empty-handed."

III

While Lichas is preparing to take his departure, and bidding adieu to Iole and her companions, Deianira seizes the opportunity to seek the confidence and sympathy of her handmaidens. Entering the room where they are sitting, she sets down a casket, fast locked and corded, which she has brought with her. Now that she is alone with her friends she gives way to those feelings which she had carefully suppressed in the presence of Lichas. "Alas!" she sighs, "I fear that my day is over, and this young beauty from Eubœa has usurped my place in my husband's heart. But perchance I have got a charm which shall keep him true to me. Listen, and judge for yourselves. When Hercules was bringing me from Ætolia to his home at Tiryus, we came to the River Evenus; and there sat Nessus, a centaur, whose business it was to carry travellers on his back across that deep and dangerous ford. I mounted that strange courser, and he, in wanton mischief, fled at full gallop across the hills. I shrieked to Hercules for aid, and forthwith he drew his mighty bow, and sent an arrow, sure and keen, deep into the centaur's side. Nessus tottered, and fell; and, being already on the point of death, he spoke to me in a faint voice, and said: 'Daughter of Œneus, I will give thee something as a memorial of me, because thou art the last whom I carried across

the ford. And this shall be my gift: take of the blood which thou seest flowing from this wound, and keep it carefully; for the arrow which has taken my life was dipped in the gall of the Hydra,[1] which, though fatal to me, gives to my blood a powerful charm. And if ever thou art in doubt of Hercules' wandering affections anoint a robe with the blood, and give it to him to wear: it shall bind him to thee for ever.' So saying, he fell back, and died. I have kept the charm all these long years, and now I am minded to use it in my need. But what think ye?"

Her friends give a hesitating assent to the plan; and at the same moment Lichas enters, to take a final farewell. "I have stayed too long," he says; "give me my charge, and let me go." Then Deianira places the casket in his hands, and says: "Take this, and carry it safely to Hercules; it contains a robe, wrought by my own hands, for him to wear when he offers sacrifice for his victory. And see that no one meddles with the fastenings; let it be kept safe locked until all is ready for the sacrifice; and let not the robe come near the fire or feel the heat of the sun until it is time for him to put it on. Take also with thee this ring, which he will quickly recognise as a token from me." Lichas promises to carry out her orders faithfully, and departs, taking with him the casket and the ring.

He has not been gone long when Deianira, who,

[1] A serpent with many heads, slain by Hercules.

after dismissing him, was called to another part of the palace, suddenly returns to the women's apartment, with signs of agitation and alarm on her face. "Oh! my friends," she cries, "I fear that I have acted rashly. Hear now what I have just seen, and judge for yourselves. When I anointed the robe for Hercules, I threw the flock of wool which I had used for the purpose into the courtyard, and, returning just now to the spot, I noticed that the wool, which had chanced to fall in the full blaze of the sun, had crumbled away into dust, and all about it there rose from the earth a sort of bubbling foam, like the froth of new wine. Now, if the blood of Nessus, infected by the Hydra's gall, has this fearful power, how shall it not prove deadly to my husband? I remember well how carefully Nessus charged me to keep the fatal drug in a dark, cool place, and guard the anointed robe, until the moment when it was needed, from heat of sun or fire; for warmth, it seems, sets free its deadly virtue. And now I bethink me that this same venom blighted even the life of the divine centaur, Chiron.[1] But of this be assured: if harm come to Hercules by my deed, I will not long survive him."

IV

Before many hours have gone by the worst fears of Deianira are realised. She is standing on

[1] The teacher of Hercules, and other famous heroes.

a high turret of the palace, and anxiously scanning the road which leads down to the sea, when the sound of a horse's hoofs falls upon her ears, and before long she perceives a solitary horseman riding at full gallop towards the house of Hercules. With tottering steps and wildly beating heart she descends to meet the messenger, and a moment after her son Hyllus is standing before her, gazing at her with stern and angry eyes. His words are as cruel as his looks. "Mother," he says, "I would that thou wert dead, or no mother of mine." "Oh my son," falters she, "what have I done to make thee abhor me?" "Thou hast this day slain my father," answers Hyllus.

Then, while his mother stands stricken with horror at his last words, Hyllus tells how he found his father on the rocky promontory of Cenæum in North-western Eubœa, preparing a sacrifice to Zeus. The altar was built, and Hercules was about to begin the solemn rite, when Lichas arrived, bringing the fatal gift from Deianira. The casket was opened, and Hercules viewed with delight the splendid robe, covered with rare designs by the cunning needle of his wife. He put it on, and proceeded with the sacrifice; the victims were slain, and soon a great flame leaped up from the altar, licking up the blood and fat of the carcases, and wrapping the huge pile of pine logs in a sheet of fire. And as Hercules stood in the fierce blaze, the deadly venom of the Hydra, with which the

robe was saturated, began to work: the garment clung close, as though glued to his flesh, and a spasm of sharp pain struck inward to his very bones. Then he called with a terrible voice to Lichas, and asked him why he had contrived this treacherous snare; but he, poor man, had nothing to say, but that he had brought it from Deianira. Thereupon Hercules caught him by the ankle, and hurled him, as one who slings a stone, far out over the edge of the cliff, and he was dashed to pieces on the rocks below.

Meanwhile the deadly drug was gnawing deeper and deeper into the hero's mighty frame. Now he lay rolling on the ground, now he leapt high into the air, torn by cruel agony; and the rocks of Eubœa, and the towering cliffs of Locris, across the strait, rang with his fearful cries. In the midst of his torments he caught sight of his son Hyllus, who was standing among the terrified spectators of his father's martyrdom, and being now exhausted by his struggles he called to the lad, and bade him draw near. Hyllus obeyed, and Hercules, at his own request, was placed in a boat, and ferried across to the mainland. "And soon thou shalt behold him," adds Hyllus, "alive or dead. 'Tis the work of thine own hands; and may the gods do so to thee, and more also, for thou hast destroyed the noblest man in all this world."

"Oh! my Queen, wilt thou not speak?" cries one of the maidens, who have been standing by Deianira

during this recital. "Dost thou not see that thy silence condemns thee?" But her words fall unheeded on the ears of Deianira: there is nothing left for the broken-hearted wife to say, and but one thing to do, and so she vanishes, pallid and speechless, from the scene.

Hyllus turns coldly away: he is convinced of his mother's guilt, and has no thought of pity for her. While he is busy in the courtyard preparing a couch for his father, he perceives Deianira standing near him, looking at him with eyes of agonised entreaty. But she reads no relenting on those cold, hard features, and, flying from his accusing presence, she wanders distractedly from room to room. Every familiar household thing speaks to the heart of the good mother and wife, piercing her with new anguish; every time she meets one of the servants who have loved her so well her tears flow afresh, as she thinks that another will now rule in her place. At last she enters the chamber of Hercules, and, flinging herself on the couch, cries aloud: "Farewell, house and home! Farewell, happy scenes of my wedded joy! I am undone, undone!" With that she snatches a sword from the wall, unclasps the brooch which fastens her gown at the shoulder, and drives the keen blade deep into her heart.

There she is found by an old domestic, who has been following her movements from a distance. Alarmed by the woman's shrieks, Hyllus comes

hurrying to the scene. He has just heard the whole story from Deianira's handmaids, and learnt that his mother had acted in good faith, deceived by the revengeful craft of Nessus. When he sees his mother stretched dying on the floor, he is filled with remorse, and, flinging himself by her side, takes her in his arms, and covers her face with kisses. "Oh, my mother," he cries, "I have slain thee by my cruel words! Now am I doubly orphaned, and half my loss is by mine own fault." But while he speaks, a last shudder marks the passing of her soul, and he will never know whether his words have brought comfort to his mother's wounded spirit in the hour of death.

V

But the lesser grief is swallowed up in the greater, for now a mournful procession is seen approaching the house. On a litter, borne with anxious tenderness by eight stalwart warriors, lies the stricken form of Hercules. For the moment his dreadful sufferings have relaxed, and he lies in a sort of stupor, voiceless and still. With a sharp cry of grief Hyllus springs forward to meet that company; but an old man who walks by the litter checks him gently, whispering: "Hush! my son; he is not dead, but sleepeth; be still, lest thou awaken his torments, and bring on another fit of frenzy."

But the warning comes too late. Already

Hercules is beginning to mutter and moan, and soon he starts up from his couch with a piercing cry: "Woe is me! To what land have ye brought me? O bitter, bitter pain!"

The litter is set down near the spot where Hyllus has prepared a deep, soft couch for his father; and slowly, with infinite care and gentleness, the martyred hero is lifted up, and laid on the easier resting-place. But the lightest touch on his scorched and blistered skin is torture to him. That haughty spirit, which has braved a thousand perils, sinks under the dire ordeal of helpless suffering. "Come to my aid," he cries, "ye Greeks, for whom I have toiled all my life, ridding your land of monsters; slay me with the sword, or bring fire, and burn up this miserable, agonising flesh!"

At last the painful duty is ended, and Hercules lies, in such comfort as his state admits, on the bed prepared for him. Hyllus kneels at the bedside, wiping the sweat of agony from his father's brow. The pain has now grown somewhat milder, and Hercules speaks in calmer and more measured tones. "Behold me, my son," he says, "the mighty man whom neither the jealousy of heaven's queen,[1] nor the loathed Eurystheus could subdue, now brought to naught by the cunning of one weak woman. Now shall I see whether thou art a true son of mine or not. Go bring that accursed

[1] Hera, wife of Zeus, by whose enmity the twelve labours were imposed on Hercules.

woman, and place her in my hands, that she may receive the reward of her iniquity. Yes; she has wasted my body and subdued my spirit, so that I cried and wailed like a girl. Look," he adds, throwing off the coverlid, and disclosing the fearful havoc wrought by the robe of Nessus on his body — "look at the fair work of her hands! See how the venom has burnt away my flesh and withered all my pride and my strength. Yet these were the arms which wrestled with the fierce Nemean lion; on these shoulders I carried the boar of Erymanthus into the presence of Eurystheus; with these hands I dragged the three-headed hound from the throne of Pluto, and brought him captive to the light of day. And now I lie here, a nerveless, scorched, and crippled carcass, laid low by a force which I cannot touch or see. But she who hath done this shall yet learn that this arm can reach her, even in the hour of death."

"Alas! my dear father," answers Hyllus gently, "she has wronged thee in naught, save in loving thee too much. Nay, hear me," he urges, answering an angry look from Hercules. "She is beyond the reach of thy anger." "What meanest thou?" asks his father. "She died, not an hour ago, by her own hand, when she learnt from my lips the mischief which her gift had wrought. But she sent it in all innocence, thinking that it was a powerful spell to bind thee to her in firm bonds of love. 'Twas the guile of Nessus——"

At that fatal name Hercules raises a loud and lamentable cry. "Thou hast pronounced my doom," he says. "Now I see it all. 'Tis the dead hand that slays me, as I was warned by an oracle long ago. The end is near of which a later portent spoke, telling me that the last of my trials was drawing near. I dreamed of long and happy days on earth, of a peaceful home and an honoured age, but now shall I find rest in the grave."

Then he looks long and solemnly at his eldest-born. "Give me thy hand, my son." Hyllus takes his father's hand. "Now swear to do my bidding —nay, swear it, or dread thy father's curse." "I swear it," says Hyllus after some hesitation. "Hear, then, my command," continues Hercules. "Thou knowest the high peak of Œta, sacred to my father Zeus?" "I know it," replies Hyllus; "many a time have I offered sacrifice there." "Thither thou shalt bear me," resumes his father, "and, having heaped up a great funeral pile, thou shalt lay me on it, even as I am, and set fire to it with thine own hand, for thus, and thus only, can I be healed of my grievous wounds."

Hyllus is shocked at the task imposed upon him, which seems to him nothing less than parricide. But at length he yields to his father's urgent entreaty, making it a condition, however, that the fire is to be lighted by some other hand.

"I have one more charge to lay upon thee," adds Hercules, when this matter is settled. "Thou

knowest the maiden Iole?" Hyllus starts. "Then mark me. I sent her hither to be thy bride, and this was the beginning of our woes. But let not this deter thee from wedding her, for 'tis a matter very near my heart that thou and she should be joined in marriage. Dost thou hear me?" "Oh, my father!" cries Hyllus, "how can I take her for my bride when she was the cause of thine and my mother's death?" "Wilt thou obey me or not?" answers Hercules sternly; and Hyllus, fearing to provoke the dying man by further opposition, reluctantly consents.

Here the curtain falls on our hero's story; but other poets have told us of the final scene, where the son of Zeus, his mortal part purged away by fire, becomes an immortal spirit, and is caught up to dwell in that high heavenly seat, the home of the blessed gods who live for ever.

III.—PHILOCTETES

"Groans rise on griefs, oh Pericles! nor they
Who feed the woe, in wine or feast, are gay.
The billow of the many-roaring deep
Has borne these pleasures in its whelming sweep.
Our grief-swollen hearts now draw their breath in pain;
Yet blessings, oh my friend! shall smile again.
The gods reserve for seeming-careless woe
A balm, and antidotes on grief bestow.
In turn the cure and suffering take their round,
And we now groaning feel the bleeding wound:
Now other breasts the shifting tortures know;
Endure, nor droop thus womanish in woe."

SIR C. A. ELTON, from ARCHILOCHOS.

WE read in the last story how Hercules was burned, at his own command, on Mount Œta. His son Hyllus having refused to light the pyre on which his father, still living, was laid, this office was performed by Philoctetes, son of Pœas, King of Malis, and in gratitude for the service Hercules presented him with the bow and arrows which he himself had received from Apollo at the beginning of his labours.

Philoctetes afterwards joined the great host of Greek chieftains who followed Agamemnon to Troy. On their voyage thither the Greeks landed on the small island of Chrysa to offer sacrifice to Athene, and there Philoctetes was bitten in the

foot by a water-snake. The venom of this serpent produced an incurable wound, accompanied by intolerable pain, and the terrible cries of Philoctetes interrupted the Greeks in the performance of their religious rites. By the advice of Odysseus, Philoctetes was landed on the barren coast of Lemnos, with his bow and arrows and a small supply of food and raiment. There he lived in a cave for ten years, supporting his life painfully by shooting the sea-birds which abounded in that desolate spot.

During all this time the Greeks were engaged in the siege of Troy. At last, when their greatest champions had been slain, and they had almost given up hope, they learned from an oracle that Troy would never fall until they brought back Philoctetes with his bow from Lemnos, and sent for Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, who was then living at Scyros. Odysseus accordingly fetched Neoptolemus from Scyros, and the two set out together to carry Philoctetes to Troy.

I

The scene is a wild spot on the north-east coast of Lemnos. Two vessels are moored close to the shore, carefully concealed behind a jutting promontory, and on the beach stand two men, conversing together in low and cautious tones. One is a man of middle age, whose dark, clustering hair is already streaked with grey; he is little of

stature, but deep-chested and mighty of limb, and on his brow are stamped the strong lines of anxious thought: for this is Odysseus, son of Lærtes, and the most sagacious of the Greeks. The other is a youth of open and ingenuous countenance and heroic build, easily recognised, by his likeness to his father, as Neoptolemus, only son of the god-like Achilles.

"This is the place," says Odysseus, "where we left him ten years ago. Not far from here is a cavern, formed like a tunnel, with two entrances, facing east and west, affording a sunny seat, evening and morning, for the winter, and within, a cool, breezy shelter on sultry summer days. Lower down, a little to the left, is a spring of water—at least there was one when last I was here. Now, go and see if the man is still dwelling in the cavern, and bring me back word. But move cautiously, so that he perceive thee not."

Thus directed, Neoptolemus goes in search of the cave, while Odysseus remains in hiding. Springing lightly up the rocky path the active youth soon hears the sound of running water. Guided by the sound he comes to the spot where a fresh spring bubbles up from the face of the cliff, and a little above he notices a deep fissure in the rock, leading into a vaulted chamber. A cool breeze fans his cheek as he stoops his head and peers into the grotto, and a gleam of light indicates the position of the western entrance. In one corner of the cavern is a rude couch of leaves; on the floor lies

a drinking-cup, roughly fashioned of wood; and the smouldering remnants of a fire show that the place has been recently inhabited. But for the moment the master of this sorry household is absent, and Neoptolemus turns away, to carry his report to Odysseus. Pausing for a moment outside the entrance, he is filled with horror and pity by the sight of some rags drying in the sun. He perceives by the dark stains on the linen that they have been lately used as bandages for some grievous wound.

"Where is he? Have you found him?" asks Odysseus eagerly, when he sees Neoptolemus returning. "So our friend still keeps his old quarters," he observes when Neoptolemus has described what he has seen. "He cannot be far off, crippled as he is by his old wound. No doubt he has gone out to get food, or in search of some healing herb. Now send one of your men to keep watch, that he may not catch us unawares, for my life would not be worth a moment's purchase if I came within shot of his bow."

When the sentinel has been posted, Odysseus draws near to his young companion with an air of confidence and mystery, and begins to unfold his plan. His task is no easy one. Neoptolemus is a true son of his father, and inherits that lofty scorn of treachery and double-dealing to which Achilles once gave utterance in these words of fire: "Loathèd to me even as the gates of death is he who keeps one thing in his heart and speaks

another." And now Odysseus seeks to persuade him to play the part of a traitor and a liar. "Hearken to me," he begins, "son of great Achilles: the bow of Philoctetes we must have, or we shall never take Troy. I dare not venture into his presence while he is armed with those deadly weapons; directly he saw me he would shoot me like a dog. But against thee he can have no grudge; thou belongest to a younger generation, and hadst no part in the injury which he received from us. It will be easy for thee to steal thy way into his heart, and that thou mayest the better do so, pretend that thou art a deserter from the Greek camp, which thou hast left in bitter enmity against the sons of Atreus[1] and against me. When he hears this he will receive thee with open arms, and thou wilt soon find an opportunity to steal his bow. I know," concludes this wily counsellor in tones of winning sweetness, "that it is against thy nature to play this part. But play it, my son," he adds, laying a fatherly hand on the young lad's shoulder; "be false for one little hour; after that let all thy life be just. Is there not a cause?"

Neoptolemus likes the scheme of Odysseus as little as that practised intriguer had supposed. "Cannot we take him by force?" he objects. "Impossible," replies Odysseus; "so long as he holds the bow of Hercules he is invincible." Neo-

[1] Agamemnon and Menelaus, leaders of the expedition against Troy.

ptolemus still hesitates: his frank and gallant spirit revolts at the thought of such treachery. But Odysseus is a master of casuistry, a very Jesuit for subtlety of brain, and he brings all the resources of his intellect to bear on that ingenuous and untried nature, urging him with grave reasons of State, and firing his ambition with the thought that he, a mere boy, shall be the means of bringing low that proud city which for ten years has baffled the valour and wisdom of a hundred veteran chieftains. At last the youth gives way, and consents to carry out the plan of Odysseus. After giving his final instructions, Odysseus withdraws to a place of security; and Neoptolemus is left alone on the shore, where he is joined soon after by a few picked members of his crew, who have been despatched by Odysseus to bear him company and corroborate his story.

II

The honest sailors are full of curiosity, and ply their young master with questions about the unhappy castaway whom they have come to seek. He shows them the cave of Philoctetes, and describes the life which he may be supposed to have been leading for the last ten years. His shipmates listen eagerly to a narrative so apt to move their sympathies. "Poor soul!" says a grizzled mariner, the trusted helmsman of the young prince's galley,

"How must he have suffered, left alone in this savage place, without one friendly eye to cheer him, one friendly hand to nurse him in his sickness! Every want to be supplied by his own labour—and he so sorely crippled, always in pain, hardly able to move. He, the son of a king, brought up in honour and luxury, to be thus abandoned, like a wild beast, with hunger and anguish as his sole companions, and only the wild rocks to answer his cries!" "It was the will of heaven," answers Neoptolemus. "This poor sufferer is the gods' appointed instrument by which, when the fated hour is come, they will bring about the destruction of Troy."

"Hush!" exclaims one of the sailors. "I hear a sound as of one who walks with pain." All ears are instantly on the alert, and soon the sound of slow, shuffling footsteps is distinctly heard. Then a stone is dislodged from the path below them, and rattles down on to the beach, and a sharp cry follows. "Hark!" says Neoptolemus. "He stumbles; he is close at hand; he is here!"

Even as he speaks a weird figure appears on the rocky platform before the entrance of the cave. It is the figure of a man approaching middle age, but sorely wasted by suffering and privation. His face is half concealed by a mass of shaggy hair and unkempt beard; his clothes hang about him in tatters, and his skin is blackened by long exposure to the weather. Pausing in his painful

walk he stares wildly at the strangers who have invaded his poor domain. "Of what land are ye?" he asks; "and what has brought you to this scene of desolation? By your garb ye should be Greeks—a name most dear to my heart. But let me hear your voice; and shrink not from me, though I look so wild. Pity a miserable outcast, friendless, abandoned, in solitude, and in pain. Speak to me; let me hear one word of kindness, if ye be men of women born."

"I will answer thy first question first," replies Neoptolemus. "We are Greeks." "Heaven bless thee for that word!" cries the hermit. "Now say, what happy chance, what friendly wind, has brought thee hither?" "My name is Neoptolemus, son of Achilles," answers Neoptolemus. "My home is in sea-girt Scyros, and thither I am voyaging now." At the mention of Achilles' name the stranger utters a cry of joy. "Whence comest thou?" he asks; "and what errand has brought thee to this isle?" "I come from Troy," is the answer. "From Troy?" repeats the solitary in a tone of surprise. "Thou wast not with us when we first followed Agamemnon in quest of Helen."

It is part of the plan in which Neoptolemus has been instructed by Odysseus that he should affect total ignorance of Philoctetes' name and story. "What is thy name?" he asks; "and what knowest thou of Agamemnon or of Troy?" Philoctetes is shocked to find himself thus for-

The Fates

gotten. "Is it possible?" he exclaims. "Am I, then, so abhorred of heaven that no whisper of my wrongs has reached my native shores? My very name is blotted out, while I linger here in a living death. How must my cruel destroyers laugh to find their secret kept so well!" Then he describes in moving detail how the act of heartless desertion was accomplished. "We put in at this island of Lemnos on our voyage from Chrysa, and I lay down in this cavern to rest a while, for I was worn out with pain and long tossing on the deep. After many hours I awoke from a long and heavy sleep, and looked around me. I listened for the voice of my comrades, but the only sound which met my ears was the plashing of water outside the cave. Then a sudden chill of terror struck home to my heart. I dragged myself painfully to the top of the cliff, and scanned the sea below me, and there I saw the last sails of the fleet disappearing below the sky. I raved, I cursed, I tore my hair, and wept; but my only answer was the cry of the startled sea-birds. Then for many days I lay in a sort of stupor, careless of life. But by degrees the wants of this poor, tortured body roused me to exertion, and I began to crawl about, seeking food and water and fuel. With sore labour I at last succeeded in kindling a fire by striking sparks from a stone; and for ten years I have kept it burning, and it has kept me alive. Once or twice a vessel has touched

here, driven by stress of weather; and those of her company who saw me here pitied me, and gave me a little food and clothing, but not one of them would take me on board, though I besought them earnestly and with tears. And so I drag on my heavy days, feeling the wound gnaw deeper and deeper into my flesh. Such is the doom which Odysseus and the sons of Atreus have brought upon me. May the gods in recompense make them even as I am!"

The shipmates of Neoptolemus are deeply moved, and press round Philoctetes with warm words of sympathy. But Neoptolemus has given his word to Odysseus, and the influence of that powerful and subtle mind is still strong upon him. Without delay he opens his attack: "I know that your story is true," he says, addressing Philoctetes, "for I also have had experience of the villainy and treachery of the Greek leaders." At these words Philoctetes is all attention, and presses him to declare the nature of his grievance. With feigned reluctance Neoptolemus complies, and proceeds with the narrative of his pretended wrongs. "When my father, Achilles, had fallen, slain by the hand of Apollo, they sent Odysseus, and Phœnix, the foster-father of Achilles, and brought me in great pomp and state from Scyros, alleging that the city was destined never to fall, save by my hand. After two days' voyage we sighted those accursed shores; and as soon as I had paid

the rites of sorrow and duty to my father's corpse I went to the sons of Atreus, and claimed the arms of Achilles as my lawful inheritance. From them I learnt, with what grief and anger you may suppose, that the arms had already been given to Odysseus. When I upbraided them for their treason to my father and to me, Odysseus, who was standing near, replied with cool assurance that the arms were his by just right. 'I saved them from the Trojans,' he said, 'and I saved thy father's body from mutilation and shame.[1]' On hearing this I let my anger have full scope, and assailed that false friend with reproaches so keen and bitter that he, cold and prudent as he is, was stung to the quick, and answered fiercely, calling me deserter and stay-at-home and malapert boy. 'These arms are mine,' he ended, 'and mine they shall remain, for all thy bluster.' Forthwith I rushed from that hated presence, manned my galley, and set sail for Scyros. And from that hour whoever hates the sons of Atreus—for Odysseus is only their tool—is my friend."

Neoptolemus has played his part well, and Philoctetes is thoroughly deceived. The whole story is a fiction, cunningly contrived to touch that sick and lonely sufferer in his weakest point. For ten years he has brooded over his wrongs, and his hatred of Odysseus and the sons of Atreus has become a master passion, absorbing every thought and feeling.

[1] See Homer, *Odyssey*, v. 309.

"Thou comest as a friend indeed," he says to Neoptolemus, "for thou hatest him whom I hate more than all the world. I know that arch-schemer and his subtle tongue, ready to serve him in any vile design. But tell me, was Ajax, son of Telamon, present when these things happened?" "He was dead, my friend," answers Neoptolemus sadly, "or I should never have suffered this wrong. All the bravest and the best have been taken—Achilles and Patroclus, stout Ajax, and Nestor's gallant son Antilochus—all are gone, and meaner spirits usurp their place." "Strange irony of heaven!" cries Philoctetes. "For all the noble and just the gates of death stand wide; the best and greatest pass away in their prime; but wretches like these still live and flourish to the end!"[1] "'Tis true," replies Neoptolemus. "I have had enough of this mad world, where right and wrong are turned upside down; henceforth I will hide my head in my little island home, where at least I shall not be plagued by knaves and cowards. Up, comrades! Let us aboard, and put a long stretch of sea between us and the land of Troy. And farewell, son of Pœas—fare thee well! May the gods heal thee and bless thee! Now I must go."

At these words of Neoptolemus, Philoctetes starts from the rock on which he has been sitting. There is a look of terror on his face, and a strong shudder

[1] Comp. Wordsworth: "The good die first,
And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust
Burn to the socket."

passes through his limbs. "Wilt thou go?" he falters. "Wilt thou leave me here? Thou canst not be so cruel! I beseech thee, by all that thou holdest most dear, forsake me not thus. Take me as thou wilt—on the bow, on the stern, in the hold—anyhow, anywhere—only take me away from this horrible place. I will not vex thee with my cries; I will hide me in the darkest corner of thy ship, and thou shalt not see me or hear me till we reach the shore. See, I kneel to thee," he cries, flinging himself, though it costs him cruel anguish, at the feet of Neoptolemus, and clasping his knees—"I, who might be thy father! Yield—oh! yield to my entreaty, so when the hour of trial and sorrow shall come to thee—as it must come to all—thou shalt be comforted by the memory of this good deed!"

The sailors join their entreaties to this heart-rending appeal, and Neoptolemus, after a show of of resistance, consents. "Thou shalt come with us," he says. "Let us go on board at once; and may the gods give us good speed." "Now blessings on you, comrades," cries Philoctetes, "and a thousand blessings on thee, worthy son of a noble sire! Give me but a moment, that I may bid farewell to this sorry home of mine; and come thou with me into the cave, that thou mayest the better remember from what misery thou hast saved me." Neoptolemus yields to his request, and is about to follow him into the cave, when he is checked by an exclamation from

one of the sailors, and, looking round, he perceives that two new figures have appeared on the scene. One of these has the appearance of a merchant; the other is one of Neoptolemus' crew, who was left, with two besides him, to guard the vessel. They have been sent by Odysseus to assist in carrying out the design against Philoctetes.

"Son of Achilles," says the pretended merchant, "I bring thee news which, I think, should win me thanks and reward from thee. I am a trader, returning from Troy, where I have just landed a cargo of wine, and, chancing to put in here on my homeward journey, I learnt from thy men that thou wast on the island. Thou art in danger, young prince: Phœnix has been despatched in a vessel from Troy, charged by the generals to pursue thee, and bring thee back." "And why," asks Neoptolemus, "did not Odysseus come himself on this errand?" "He has other work in hand," answers the merchant; "he set sail in another vessel, at the same time as Phœnix, to seek another man." "And who is he?" inquires Neoptolemus; but before answering the man beckons him aside. "I will tell thee," he says, lowering his voice; "but say first who is this stranger"—glancing towards Philoctetes. Neoptolemus has no sooner named him than the merchant, with an air of alarm, whispers: "Not another word! Make haste, and get thee gone from this island."

This by-play has aroused the suspicions of

Philoctetes. "What does the man mean," he demands with the fretfulness of an invalid, "by his whispering and pointing?" "Let him answer himself," replies Neoptolemus. "My lord," says the merchant in a tone of entreaty, "urge me not to betray the secrets of the generals; I am a poor man, and depend on them for my living." "If thou meanest Agamemnon and his brother," answers Neoptolemus, "know that I hate them; and as to thy fears, say that I compelled thee to speak." "Well, then, I will tell thee," says the merchant; "and see that thou bear me out, and save me from harm. Odysseus and Diomede have sworn an oath to bring this man"—pointing to Philoctetes—"to Troy either by persuasion or by force." "And why," asks Neoptolemus, "do they desire, after so many years, to bring back him whom they have injured so deeply?" "This also I can tell thee," answers the merchant. "There is a certain Helenus, son of Priam, and famous for his prophetic gift. Him Odysseus made prisoner by guile, and brought in chains to the Greek camp; and, among many other prophecies, he declared that Troy would never fall until Philoctetes was persuaded to return and take part in the siege. Forthwith Odysseus vowed that he would carry him thither, willing or unwilling; therefore make haste, both of you, if you wish to avoid capture."

The impostor now takes his leave, having played the part assigned to him by Odysseus. The whole

of his story, excepting that part which refers to Helenus, is an invention designed to give colour to the deception of Neoptolemus.

"O villain, villain!" cries Philoctetes. "*He* persuade me! *I* go with him! I am as likely to come back from the dead, when my life is done. Now let us be gone, and put a wide stretch of water between us and my hated foe." "The wind is contrary," objects Neoptolemus; "we cannot sail yet." "Any wind is good enough," replies Philoctetes, "to carry us from this detested isle." "Well, since thou wilt have it so, we will sail," rejoins Neoptolemus; "therefore, if thou hast aught to carry with thee, go fetch it, and we will get on board." Philoctetes replies that there is a certain healing herb of which he desires to take a supply. "And I must look about," he adds, "and see if I have dropped any of my good arrows, for I should be loth to lose one of them." Neoptolemus gazes with covetous eyes on the famous bow which Philoctetes is holding in his hand. "And is this indeed the bow of Hercules?" he asks in a tone of awe. "Ay; it is," answers Philoctetes—"this and no other." "If I might hold it in my hand a moment," hints Neoptolemus; "but I fear I am too bold: this bow is a thing divine." "Nay," says the unsuspecting Philoctetes; "this shall be granted thee, and much more. Hast thou not given me back to life and promised to place me beyond reach of mine enemies? But first come with me into the

cave, that I may seek for the things I need." "Lead on, I follow," replies the young hero; and they enter the cave together.

III

"What ails thee?" asks Neoptolemus, seeing Philoctetes suddenly pause, catching his breath, and convulsively gripping a projecting rock at the side of the cavern. "'Tis nothing—it will pass," gasps Philoctetes; but the words have hardly left his lips when a spasm of fearful agony seems to wrench every sinew in his body. "Oh, I can hide it no longer!" he cries, his voice rising to a shriek. "Oh, piercing, piercing pain! It devours me, it consumes me! Take thy sword, my son, and strike off my foot." Then, still writhing and shuddering in torture, he holds out his bow to Neoptolemus. "Quick! take it," he says, "and guard it safe. When these pangs have abated I shall fall into a deep sleep, and see that none disturb me till I awaken of myself. If my enemies come while I am sleeping, let them not persuade thee to give up the bow for a moment. There, take it—and heaven grant that it bring thee better fortune than it has brought to me and to him who had it before me."

"Ay; heaven grant it!" repeats Neoptolemus solemnly, receiving the wondrous bow, on which such mighty issues depend, and gazing, conscience

stricken, at the unhappy sufferer, who now sinks down at his feet, and lies tossing and moaning on the couch. "Where art thou, my son?" murmurs Philoctetes after an interval. "Come closer, give me thy hand, and swear thou wilt not leave me." "I swear it," answers Neoptolemus, taking the sick man by the hand. So for a while they remain, joined in that clasp of kindness; then Philoctetes rolls his eyes towards the light, and cries faintly: "Upward, upward—bear me to yonder height—let me go! Unhand me, I say!" "His mind is wandering," thinks Neoptolemus, releasing his hand; and soon, after a final cry, the martyred hero sinks back, and lies, breathing softly, in a deep, untroubled sleep. Neoptolemus remains standing by the side of the couch, his mind torn by conflicting emotions.

"Now thou mayest do it pat,"[1] whispers one of his men, who has stolen in unperceived. "The bow is ours, and the wind is blowing fair; up, let us be gone!" But other thoughts are beginning to make themselves heard in the young hero's heart. He loathes the base part which he is playing; and, moreover, the bow is useless except in the hands of Philoctetes. While he hesitates the sick man begins to stir and moan in his sleep; and before long he opens his eyes, and gazes tenderly on the face of Neoptolemus. "Dear child of my old friend," he says softly; "true-hearted son of a

[1] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III. iii. 73.

noble sire, how can I thank thee for thy goodness? Thou hast stood by me in my darkest hour; thou hast borne my cries with patience, and faced all the horror of this wound, which pollutes the very air with its foulness. Now set me on my feet, and, as soon as this faintness is passed let us go down to thy ship."

Supported by those vigorous young arms Philoctetes rises from his bed; but now that the moment of departure is come, Neoptolemus feels that he can carry the deception no further. "What shall I do?" he cries, in dire perplexity. Startled by his change of tone, Philoctetes asks what he means. "Oh, hard choice!" cries Neoptolemus again, avoiding those anxious eyes, which are turned on him in doubt and alarm. "'Twere shame to tell him—'twere shame not to tell!" "Wilt thou betray me?" asks Philoctetes in an altered tone. "Wilt thou not take me with thee?"

There is a short, sharp struggle in the young prince's heart; then he flings away the mask altogether, and bursts out impetuously: "I will tell thee all. I have been sent by the Greek leaders to carry thee and thy bow to Troy." At these words Philoctetes starts back in amazement; a moment he stands speechless, glaring at Neoptolemus with angry eyes; then he breaks forth into a torrent of reviling and imprecations. "Thou monster!" he cries. "Thou vile compound of treachery! How canst thou dare to look me in

the face? Oh, I am betrayed, I am ruined, I am undone!" Neoptolemus stands cold and silent, still holding the weapon which he has received from Philoctetes. "Give me back my bow," cries the unhappy victim of twofold treachery; "in taking that thou takest my life. Give it back, I implore thee," he repeats, now speaking in a broken voice of entreaty. "Destroy me not altogether." Neoptolemus turns away his face; his better nature has prevented him from carrying out the whole scheme of treason; but he is not yet prepared to restore the bow. Philoctetes now assails him with bitter scorn. "'Twas a fair deed, was it not," he asks, "worthy of the son of Achilles, to steal into the heart of a sick man—a helpless, broken creature—and then rob him of his only weapon, his sole means of living, and leave him to starve on a barren island? Yes; the beasts will now have their revenge; the hunter shall be hunted, and my bones will lie bleaching on the rocks—a fair trophy of thy prowess!"

Neoptolemus is sorely shaken. The lessons of worldly wisdom and cold policy have not yet taken deep root, and the generous impulses of youth are still strong within him. He turns to his men, who are ready to follow him in everything. "What shall we do?" he cries. "Would that I had never left my home in Scyros!—then I should have been spared this cruel choice." Philoctetes perceives his advantage. "Thou art not base," he says, "but

thou hast yielded to base counsels; forget them now, and listen to the promptings of thy noble heart."

His words have gone home; another moment and the bow would be in his hands; but just at this juncture Odysseus, who during the preceding dialogue has stolen noiselessly into the cavern by its other entrance, steps forward from the angle where he has been lurking, and stands before Neoptolemus. "Villain!" he cries, "what art thou doing? Give place, and hand me the bow." At the sight of his great enemy Philoctetes recoils with horror. "Again!" he gasps. "So it was thou who didst contrive this snare?" "I, and no other," replies Odysseus. "Thou art fairly caught. Now come thy ways without more ado, or we will compel thee." "I go with thee?" answers Philoctetes, with loathing on his face. "Nay, I will die first"; and he begins to drag himself towards a jutting eminence which overhangs the rocky shore. "Seize him!" exclaims Odysseus. "He will destroy himself!" Two of the sailors spring forward at the command, and easily succeed in restraining the crippled warrior from his purpose. Feeling himself overpowered he sullenly submits, and vents his fury in curses against Odysseus. "Thou vile schemer!" he says, his voice hoarse with passion, "how well hast thou baited thy hook, making an instrument of this honest lad, who knows no harm but what thou hast taught him. Now I can see he is ashamed of his teacher and full of pity for me. Oh, I am

trapped, cheated, and beguiled, made mirth and laughter for my foes, with nothing left me but the power to curse! What seek ye of me? Why am I not loathsome to you now as when ye left me to rot in this wild place? May ye perish miserably, one and all! May heaven rain vengeance on your heads! Thus, and thus alone, could I feel that I have not suffered in vain."

The sailors are terrified by his furious imprecations, but Odysseus remains cold and indifferent. "Let him rave," he says; "I grudge him not this poor triumph. We have won the game, and have no more need of him. Having the bow we have all; there are other archers who can wield it as skilfully as he. Thou art free," he continues, addressing Philoctetes. "We want thee not; remain here, if thou wilt. I wish thee joy of thy happy home."

Odysseus is again trying to deceive Philoctetes, for he knows the bow is useless without its owner. To keep up the pretence he begins to move away, bidding an ironical adieu to his victim. Philoctetes, who believes him to be in earnest, makes a last despairing appeal to Neoptolemus. "Son of Achilles, wilt thou leave me thus?" he asks in a tone of sad reproach. Neoptolemus still hopes that he will give way when he finds that he is indeed to be deserted; he gives directions to his men to remain with Philoctetes, and watch his movements, till all is ready for the voyage to Troy, and then

begins to descend the path which leads down to the sea, carrying the bow with him.

Philoctetes is left alone with the sailors, whose rough sympathy has touched his heart. He clings to their society as the last tie which binds him to his fellow-men. All the horror of the fate which lies before him if he persists in his refusal rises before his mind's eye in vivid colours. To perish miserably by starvation—that, and nothing less, is in store for him, with all the tortures of this wound in addition. Yet when his friends urge him to yield and follow their master to Troy, he repulses them with scorn. "Never—never!" he declares; "not though the lord of heaven stood over me with his fiery bolt; not though the whole army perish before the walls of Troy! There is now but one way of release for me, and I will seek it: I go to join my father among the dead."

IV

Meanwhile Odysseus and Neoptolemus, each busy with his own thoughts, are slowly making their way towards the harbour. The old intriguer is devising new wiles to overcome the obstinacy of Philoctetes, and the young hero is trying to adjust the balance between public duty and personal feeling. At last Neoptolemus comes to an abrupt stand. "It is no use!" he exclaims. "I cannot, and I will not." "How now?" demands Odysseus, startled from his

reverie. "What is thy purpose?" "My purpose is," replies Neoptolemus, "to carry back this bow, and restore it to its owner." "Peace, foolish boy!" says Odysseus angrily; "this is no time for jesting." "I am as little inclined for jesting as thou," retorts Neoptolemus. "And thinkest thou that this will be suffered?" demands Odysseus, perceiving with alarm that the whole tissue of his fine-spun sophistry is about to be torn asunder. "And who will prevent it?" asks Neoptolemus coldly. "I," replies Odysseus, beginning to finger the hilt of his sword. "I accept the challenge," cries Neoptolemus, unsheathing his own weapon. Odysseus is no coward, but he knows that nothing is to be gained by violence. "Thou art a fool," he says, falling back a step; "thou wilt ruin all by thy silly scruples." "I may be a fool," answers Neoptolemus, "but at any rate I will not be a knave."

During this dispute they have been slowly retracing their steps, Neoptolemus leading and Odysseus following, to the mouth of the cave. Being now within speaking distance Neoptolemus raises his voice, and calls aloud: "Come forth, son of Pœas, and hear what I have to say unto thee." Odysseus steps behind a rock, and waits in hiding; and a moment after Philoctetes appears at the entrance, and demands the meaning of this new summons. "I have come to ask thee," says Neoptolemus, determined to make one more effort on behalf of his countrymen, "whether thou wilt

go with us." "Never!" comes the passionate answer. "Waste no more words, but get thee gone at once. Go back to thy friends, and take this greeting from me: a curse for Odysseus, a curse for the sons of Atreus, and a curse——" "Hold!" commands Neoptolemus. "'Tis enough. Here, take thy bow." And he holds out the weapon. Philoctetes cannot believe his ears. "Art thou deceiving me again?" he asks distrustfully. "No!" answers Neoptolemus solemnly. "I swear it by the sanctity of heaven's king." And again he offers the bow. "Stop!" cries Odysseus, coming forward from his hiding-place. "He shall not have it. I forbid it, in the name of the generals and of all the Greeks." But it is too late: the bow is already in the hands of Philoctetes. "Ha! is it thou?" he exclaims, fitting an arrow to the string, and taking aim at Odysseus. "Hast thou come to carry me to Troy? Well, thou shalt not go away empty." And he bends his bow. "Forbear!" says Neoptolemus, seizing him by the arm, and restraining him with difficulty. "Thou owest something to me. Spare his life." "It is granted," says Philoctetes after a short struggle. "I can deny thee nothing; thou hast given me mine."

"Now hear me," resumes Neoptolemus when this danger is past. "Every man must bear the fate which heaven assigns to him, but those who suffer by their own self-will are justly blamed. Thy wound was a visitation from the gods, and

came by no fault of thine; thy sin lies in this: that thou wilt not take the relief which is offered thee, but spurnest all who counsel thee for thy good as enemies and ill-wishers. For know that thou shalt never be healed of thy wound until thou hast come to Troy, and submitted thyself for treatment to the skilled leeches in the Grecian camp. And thou art destined to share with me in the capture of Priam's ancient city. Helenus, the great seer, has sworn it, and staked his life on the truth of what he utters. Say, then, wilt thou take these choice gifts—health and glory and honour—or wilt thou remain here to perish in solitude and misery?"

But Philoctetes cannot pluck out of his heart the bitter grudge which he has nursed in solitude for ten long years. His spirit, naturally frank and generous, has become warped by dwelling on one fixed idea. He is full of gratitude to Neoptolemus; but to renounce this darling grievance—no; it is too much. "Would that I were dead!" he cries in despair. "How can I deny thee, who hast saved my life? But to look my hated enemies in the face—to take their hand in friendship—I cannot, I cannot! Take me home, my son; thou hast promised it. I am tired of the world. I have played my part, and lost. Now let me hide my head in my father's house."

Neoptolemus renews his entreaties, but, finding Philoctetes deaf to every appeal, he gives up the attempt, and concludes sadly: "Have it as thou wilt, since thou art so wedded to this lot of wretched-

ness. Now lean on me, and I will help thee down to my ship." Then, tenderly supporting the sick man, he begins to descend the stony incline.

V

Thus it seems as if the sore labours of the Greeks are to end in failure, and the whole scheme of divine vengeance to be shipwrecked on one man's stubborn will. But this must not be. Human hands have not skill to unravel the tangled skein; it is necessary, therefore, that a higher power shall interpose, and untie the knot.

And so it comes to pass. Just as Neoptolemus and his companion are approaching the steepest part of the way they are arrested by a vision which fills them with wonder and awe. High on a rock which overhangs the sea, stands a being whose lofty stature and majestic beauty proclaim him as more than mortal. With regal gesture he bids them to draw near. Trembling, they obey, and listen with lowly reverence, while thus he speaks: "Hearken, son of Pœas, to my words. For thee I have left my heavenly seat, to stay thy rash journey and declare unto thee the counsels of Zeus. I am that Hercules who, after many grievous labours, was caught up to Olympus, to dwell with my sire in immortal bliss. And for thee is ordained a lot like mine. After thy ten years' penance thou shalt be healed of thy grievous wound, and win thyself an

everlasting name. With these arrows, which once were mine, thou shalt slay the guilty Paris, and return to thy father's house loaded with Trojan spoil. Only remember in thine hour of triumph to give honour to the gods, for this is what Zeus regards above all else. And whether men live, or whether they die, piety endureth for ever."

As he utters these last words of warning, a sudden blaze of overpowering light envelops the form of Hercules, striking his hearers with momentary blindness. When they have recovered the power of sight, the vision is gone, and not a sound is heard save the solemn cadence of the sea.

But no more is needed. The sight of that beloved face, the accents of that well-remembered voice, have subdued the sullen rancour of Philoctetes. "Thou hast prevailed," he says in tones of deep emotion. "It is the will of heaven, and I obey. Farewell, my rocky home in Lemnos! Farewell, ye nymphs of meadow and fountain! and give me a prosperous voyage to the land of Troy."

Stories from Euripides

I.—MEDEA

"Not forever will he escape and hide from the judgment
Who has a sinful heart; nay! at the last he is doomed.
One may pay it to-day and another may pay it to-morrow.
Yet if they seem to escape, if the doom of the Gods
Following, do not attain them while still in the land of the living,
Under the fatal ban, guiltless, their children are curst."

N. H. DOLE, from SOLON.

MEDEA was the daughter of Æetes, King of Colchis, on the eastern shores of the Black Sea. When Jason came with his comrades in the *Argo*, to fetch the Golden Fleece from Colchis, she conceived a violent passion for the young hero, and, being herself a mighty sorceress, she helped him by her magic arts to achieve his purpose, and fled with him to his home in Thessaly. Here they lived together happily for some years, and two sons were born to Jason. But after the death of Jason's uncle, which was brought about by the evil practices of Medea, they were compelled to fly from Thessaly, and sought refuge at Corinth. In this wealthy and famous city they found a hearty welcome, and Medea

won great renown by the exercise of her rare gifts. They were given apartments in the palace of Creon, King of Corinth, and lived there as his honoured guests. But after a time Jason grew weary of Medea, and he resolved to put her away, and take another wife. His choice fell upon Glauce, daughter of Creon; and her father favoured his suit.

Deep was the anger of the passionate princess when she heard of the treason intended against her. She had given up all for Jason—father, friends, and home; she had toiled for him, schemed for him, sinned for him; and now she was to be made worse than a widow, left with her children to the cold charity of strangers, a scorned and forsaken wife.

I

In the garden adjoining the palace of Creon two fair boys are playing, in charge of an elderly man-servant, who watches them with sad and kindly eyes. "Poor children!" he murmurs to himself, "what fate is in store for you, now that heaven has put enmity between your father and mother?" As he speaks an old woman is seen approaching, leaning on a staff, and muttering in low tones. She is the aged nurse of Medea, who has followed her from Colchis, and shared all her joys and sorrows since the day of her birth. "Good-morrow, nurse," says her fellow-servant; "what news of our mistress?" "Ill news," answers the old dame in her

high, quavering voice. "She lies stricken in her chamber, utterly prostrate with grief. She has not tasted a morsel of food since she heard of this fine match with the King's daughter. One furious burst of weeping follows another, and between the fits she lies like a stone, deaf to all comfort and counsel. Worst of all, she cannot bear the sight of her children. I greatly fear that she is planning some dire revenge: she is not the woman to sit down tamely under a wrong."

"'Tis a bad case," answers the tutor,[1] "but worse is to follow." "How meanest thou?" asks the nurse. "What new ills are in store for us?" "Hast thou not heard," answers he, "that Creon intends to banish Medea and her children from Corinth? I overheard two elders of the city talking about it as they sat playing at draughts by the fountain of Peirine."[2] "And will Jason suffer this?" "He cares nothing for the old ties," replies the old man; "his whole heart is absorbed in this new marriage. But say nothing to your mistress about this; she will learn it soon enough." "She shall never hear it from me," answers the faithful handmaid. "Oh, villain! I will not say curse him, for he is my master, but heaven help those poor children with such a father. Hark! I hear the voice of my mistress. Make haste, and take the children indoors,

[1] The Greek name is *pedagogue*, which has been avoided, for obvious reasons. He was a male slave who had charge of the boys when at home, and conducted them to school.

[2] A famous spring in Corinth, and a place of public resort.

and see that you keep them out of her sight. Her mood is fearful when she is crossed in her desires ; and I saw her just now darting savage glances at the boys, as if she would visit on them the crime of their father."

The old man retires with the boys into the palace, and the nurse remains pondering on what she has heard. As she sits, thus musing, a shadow falls across the path, and, looking round, she perceives that three ladies have entered the garden. They are friends of Medea, and, having heard that she is in trouble, they have come up from the city to visit her. Greeting the nurse they request her to go and inform her mistress of their presence. "I will do so," says the woman, rising from her seat, "though, truth to tell, I would almost as soon face a lioness with her cubs. But you will see her if I can persuade her to come out."

A strain of lively music comes floating from a distant chamber of the palace, where Jason is celebrating his betrothal with dance and song. "Now, this is too cruel," observes one of the ladies, who has heard something of the prince's perfidy to Medea. "Is it not enough to desert her without a cause, that he mocks her aching heart with the sounds of mirth and revelry, and flaunts his new marriage in her face?"

II

The music rises and swells into a grand, triumphal peal; and with this joyous accompaniment, as if

ushered in with studied irony, Medea enters the garden. "My friends," she says, saluting the ladies from Corinth, "I have come at your bidding, lest you should think me cold and indifferent. Behold me, then, an unhappy creature, who has staked all her happiness on one wild throw—and lost. For such is the lot of women: they are given but one chance in life; they have to trust themselves, once for all, to the honour of one man, of whom they know little or nothing, and if he prove unworthy they are utterly lost and undone. The young wife, fresh from her father's house, needs a diviner's skill to know how she is to conduct herself in her new surroundings. If she knows how to win her husband's heart she is thrice blest, but if not she had better die at once. If a man is unhappy in his home he has a hundred resources outside; the wife has but one hope, one stay, in her husband's love, and if that fail her she is bankrupt beyond repeal. Men say that we have an easy life, secure in the shelter of home, while they must face a hundred toils and perils out of doors. Alas! what are all these toils and perils weighed against the anguish, the care, the thousand bitter pangs, which make up the sad tissue of a mother's life?

"But mine is a lot of peculiar wretchedness: I am friendless, homeless, fatherless. I gave up all for this man, and now he leaves me, without refuge or succour, to wander from door to door, a houseless exile. There is but one thing left for me—to

revenge myself on the villain who has betrayed me. He may learn yet that there is nothing so fierce, nothing so terrible, as a woman scorned."

The ladies, who regard her threats as the ravings of a fevered mind, reply with soothing words; and while they are still pouring out expressions of sorrow and sympathy, Creon is seen hurrying towards the group, with looks which promise no good to Medea. He speaks as one who is accustomed to be obeyed: "Get thee gone at once, and take thy children with thee. We have had enough of thy scowling looks and angry fits, and I will not leave this spot till I am rid of thy hateful presence."

Medea dissembles her anger, and assumes a tone of plaintive appeal. "How can ye bear so hard," she asks, as if in despair, "on a poor, broken creature like me?" "I fear thee," answers Creon; "I will not conceal it—I fear thee. Thou art very wise, and versed in all means of evil; and I have heard of thy wild threats against Jason and my daughter and me." "Oh, hated wisdom!" replies Medea. "How am I misjudged because of thee! 'Tis a fatal gift, and brings naught but hatred and envy to its possessor. Why should I harm thee or thy child? Marry her to whom thou wilt—I care not. What canst thou fear from me, mighty King? Let me dwell here in peace, and thou shalt never see my face." "Thy words are soft," says Creon, "and, therefore, I trust thee less than ever. Loud

anger may pass away in sound, but when one who is injured smiles and fawns there is danger behind. Therefore I say again: Get thee gone; I will not harbour those who hate me." "I cannot resist thee," answers Medea; "thou hast said it, and I must go. Yet grant me this little boon: suffer me to stay one day longer, that I may find some place of refuge for my fatherless children. Thou art a father thyself—surely thou wilt not deny me this." "I know that I shall be called weak," replies Creon, "but I cannot refuse thee. I give thee one day to prepare for thy departure; but if to-morrow's sun shalt find thee within my borders thou shalt die." Saying this he departs, and Medea remains conversing with her friends.

"Fool!" she exclaims, instantly flinging off the mask of humility which she has worn in the presence of Creon. "He has consented to his own death and the death of his daughter and her lover. But I will proceed with caution. I will secure my retreat, if I can, before I strike the blow; and if I cannot, I will assail them sword in hand, and slay them, though I perish myself in the same hour. Ay; by great Hecate[1] I swear it; and by my grandsire Helios, I will mix them a bitter cup for their marriage feast, and they shall drink it to the dregs. Up, then, Medea! Arm thee with all thy cunning, that the world may ring with the tale of thy wrongs and thy revenge."

[1] The patron-goddess of witches.

III

The ladies whom Medea has taken into her confidence now begin to perceive that her threats against Jason are something more than mere idle noise. They sympathise with her plans of vengeance, and one of them, who is something of a moralist, is expressing her wonder at the unmanly character of Jason when she is checked by a look on the face of her companions. "Beware!" says Medea, raising a warning finger. "He comes!"

With jaunty step, gaily humming a tune, and pausing here and there to pluck a flower, Jason leisurely approaches the garden seat where Medea is sitting with her friends. "Behold the happy bridegroom in his wedding dress," whispers Medea. "How sleek and smiling he looks!"

Jason opens the interview with an air of pity and condescension. "See," he says, "what thy ungoverned temper has brought upon thee. Thou mightest have lived here in honour and comfort with thy children. But because thou wouldst not bridle thy tongue, or cease reviling me and the King, thou art to be cast out of the land. Yet I will not suffer thee to fall into poverty. Hate me as thou wilt, I shall always have a regard for thee, and wilt see that thou do not come to want."

Medea has great powers of self-constraint, but this hypocritical speech incenses her beyond all endurance. "Thou shameless villain!" she bursts

out, confronting him with flaming eyes, "how darest thou look me in the face, loaded with infamy as thou art—a caitiff whom no vows can hold, no benefits can bind? Did I not save thee from the jaws of death? Did I not forsake all for thee, and follow thee through a thousand perils, for the sake of thy love? Hast thou forgotten the day when thou didst lie grovelling at my feet, imploring my aid—and the oath which thou didst swear, to be true to me in life and in death? And after all this thou wilt cast me out, the mother of thy children, to pine in hopeless exile. Strange!" she exclaims, scanning with curious eyes that stately form and comely face, so fair to outward view, "strange that so foul a spirit should dwell in so goodly a temple!"

But Jason is proof against all reproach. Waving his hand gently, in deprecation of Medea's violence, he proceeds glibly to set forth the purity of his motives. "Thy passion has blinded thee," he begins, with a gentle smile of indulgence. "It was ever so with thee. Blind passion drove thee to desert thy home—— But I will not press that point. Only consider what thou hast gained by leaving thy home, among ignorant barbarians, and becoming a citizen in the polished land of Hellas. There thy great gifts were wasted in a desert; here thou hast a fair field for their exercise, and every day thy fame increases. Then as to this new marriage, in making this match I am consulting thy interests more than mine. Now be calm, I pray thee, and

listen to reason. How could I serve thee better—I who am an exile, as thou art—than by becoming the son-in-law of a wealthy king? Only be reasonable, and forget thy foolish jealousy, and thou and thy children shall share in all the benefits of this union."

"Specious words and graceless deeds," replies Medea—"'twas ever so with thee. If thy purpose was so good, why didst thou not ask my consent, instead of keeping me in the dark till all was settled?" "I dreaded thy wild passions," answers Jason, "and thou hast shown that my fears were justified." "Not so," retorts Medea; "thou wast ashamed of thy *barbarian* wife." "I repeat that it was for the good of thee and thy children that I determined to wed the princess," declares Jason again. Medea laughs scornfully. "Keep these blessings for thyself," says she; "I will not share them." "Well," concludes Jason, with an injured air, like one whose good intentions are wilfully misunderstood, "I will not argue with thee further. But at least thou shalt not live in poverty: let me know what thou needest, and I will supply thee without stint." "Thy gifts perish with thee!" comes the angry answer. "I will have naught of thee and thy gifts. Ay, get thee gone," she adds, as Jason begins to move towards the house. "Go, join thy young bride, and take this blessing with thee: mayest thou loathe what thou lovest, and long for what thou hast spurned!"

The character of Medea is marked by that extravagance which distinguished the Oriental from the Greek. Her frantic passion for Jason, now thwarted in its course, has changed into furious hate. The sacred flame of love, which, rightly guided and guarded, is the source of all light and life in the moral world, becomes in these lawless natures a deadly force, an instrument of destruction and ruin.

IV

It is not long before Medea receives an offer of protection and shelter. While wandering in the fields, in search of herbs for a magic potion, she meets a stranger, who inquires the way to Trœzen, whither he is bound with his attendants to visit a friend. In the course of conversation she learns that he is no less a person than Ægeus, King of Athens, newly returned from a journey to the oracle of Delphi. The quick-witted Medea at once perceives her opportunity. Affecting a deep interest in the King's concerns, she questions him on the cause of his journey, and is informed in reply that he is childless, and has been to consult the god on his hope of offspring. "Now bless the happy chance which threw me in thy way!" cries she, and then pauses modestly, as if she feared to offend by her freedom. "Who art thou?" asks Ægeus, eyeing her curiously. "What means this strange passion? And why," he adds, noting her wasted

features, "art thou roaming here so pale and forlorn?"

Thus challenged, Medea reveals her name, and pours out all the tale of her wrongs. Ægeus expresses his sympathy and concern; and then Medea, having thus cunningly wrought upon his feelings, suddenly throws herself at his feet, and implores him in passionate terms to receive her as his guest at Athens. "I do not ask thee to give me this boon for nothing," she says in conclusion. "I can richly reward thee: I am skilled in Nature's deepest secrets, and can give thee thy heart's desire. Do me this service, and thou shalt be no longer childless."

Ægeus hesitates. Creon, King of Corinth, is his ally, and he fears to offend him. But he has a great longing for a son, and he knows the fame of Medea as a powerful witch. So, on the strength of her promise, he consents to receive her, on condition that she will not attempt to accompany him from Corinth, but make her way to Athens in secret. Then he takes his leave, after binding himself by a solemn oath to fulfil his pledge.

The chief obstacle to Medea's plans of vengeance is now removed, and she hastens back, full of fierce joy, to the palace of Creon, pausing on her way through the city to communicate the happy tidings to the friends who visited her in the morning. They are overjoyed to hear that she is to find a home at Athens, "the eye of Greece," the native seat of

wisdom, where the spirit of beauty is a living presence, shedding a glad light on all the paths of life. But these fine fancies are wasted on Medea, whose mind is busy with far different thoughts. Entering the palace by a secret door, she stealthily summons the old Colchian nurse, and leads her away to a remote part of the garden. The faithful old creature is bound to her, body and soul, and Medea knows that she can trust her in everything. When they are secure from all intrusion, Medea unfolds her design. She intends to seek another interview with Jason, and beg him to allow her sons to remain with him in Corinth. "Not that I mean," she explains, "to leave my children here in the hands of my enemies; but it will serve as a pretext for sending a gift to the bride, and by this means I will contrive her death. The boys shall carry to her a robe and a wreath, as tokens of reconciliation from their mother, and implore her countenance and protection. These ornaments are steeped in a deadly poison, and as soon as she puts them on, she will be wrapped in flames, and perish miserably, with all who attempt to touch her. But this is not all: my children must die also, or my vengeance is not complete. Waste no words on me," she adds fiercely, shaking off the old woman, who clings to her with sobs and wailing cries, beseeching her to forego her fearful purpose. "They must die—I have sworn it. Now go, and summon my husband."

The nurse totters away, stricken with grief and terror; but Medea has cast a spell upon her, and she cannot break the demon influence by which her will is bound.

V

Jason willingly responds to the summons from Medea. He is not naturally cruel, only weak and self-indulgent, and he is anxious to make what reparation he can to his injured wife. She receives him with a fine show of humility and submission, which completely imposes on that shallow and feeble mind. "I have repented," she says, with a meek and downcast look, "of my hasty passion. I see clearly that thou art doing the best for me and my children by allying thyself with a wealthy and powerful house. Thou wilt pardon a woman's weakness, and not bear a grudge against me for my angry words. Come, children," she calls to the little ones, who are playing near in charge of the old nurse, "help me to make peace with your father." The boys come bounding up, and Medea takes them in her arms, and covers them with kisses. For a moment all the woman rises up within her, fighting against the jealous fiend which has almost extinguished every better instinct. "Oh, I am full of tears!" she cries; "my heart melts with love and tenderness!"

Jason, who is far from suspecting the struggle

which is raging in that half-savage breast, smiles complacently. "'Tis well," he answers, in the lofty tone of one who feels that he has won a moral victory; "say no more of the past; thy present conduct makes amends for all. Thou art acting like a prudent woman, and thou wilt have thy reward when these boys have grown to manhood." Medea starts, and shudders. "I foresee a great future for the lads; with my assistance they shall one day be mighty in the land of Hellas."

Medea has now mastered her emotion, and proceeds to urge her request. "The King commands me to leave Corinth," she says; "and I submit. I will not stand in thy way. But let the children remain with thee, and grow up under thy care." Jason agrees, on condition that he can win the King's consent. "And persuade thy bride to add her entreaties," resumes Medea. "I will send the boys with a gift which I have prepared for her—a robe and a wreath of the choicest and goodliest, which my father received from Helios, my grandsire. Go, bring the casket hither," she commands, beckoning to the nurse; "thou knowest where it lies." Jason at first demurs, bidding her keep these treasures for her own needs; but his objections are soon overborne by the stronger will of his wife, and when the casket is brought, Medea places it in the hands of her eldest son. "Take this," she says, "and lay it with lowly reverence at the feet of the young princess as a wedding gift from thy mother. And

go thou with him," she adds, addressing the younger child, "and add thy prayers to his. Make haste, and bring me back word how ye have sped."

VI

In a lofty and spacious chamber, replete with every luxury which the wealthiest city of Greece can supply, sits Glauce, Jason's affianced bride. Reclining on a silken couch, she holds a silver mirror in her hand, and glances from time to time at the reflection of that childish beauty which has caught the fickle heart of Jason. Behind her stands a handmaid, with dexterous fingers dressing the rich auburn tresses of her mistress. Half-a-dozen other handmaids, directed by an elderly dame, are busy preparing the wardrobe of the royal bride.

Suddenly the doors of the chamber are thrown open, and Glauce starts up with a cry of pleasure to greet her lover, who is just crossing the threshold. Then, perceiving that he is accompanied by Medea's children, she stops, with a pettish gesture of dislike, and throws herself back on the couch, averting her face. "How is this?" says Jason in a tone of displeasure. "Why dost thou turn away from the poor children who have come to beg thy intercession with thy father that they may be allowed to live with us? See what lovely gifts they have brought with them!" And, lifting the lid of the coffer, he shows the splendid robe and wreath. At

the word "gifts" Glauce turns round, and glances at the contents of the coffer. "Oh, how beautiful!" she exclaims, captivated by the dazzling lustre of the jewels, and the rare tissue of the gown, wrought by no human hands. Perceiving her altered mood, Jason loses no time in urging the claims of the children, and requests her to use her influence with the King in their favour. Glauce, whose idle fancy is completely enthralled by the beauty of the gifts, readily consents; and soon afterwards Jason withdraws, taking the boys with him.

The vain beauty is not sorry for his departure, for she is burning with eagerness to try the effect of her new finery. Hardly has the door closed behind him when she snatches up the wreath with greedy hands, and sets it on her head; then, throwing the robe round her, she goes up to a tall mirror, and glances, panting and glowing with pleasure, at her smiling image in the glass. Her maidens crowd round her with cries of admiration and applause; and she, when she has gazed her fill, walks with dainty step down the whole length of the room, to show off her brave raiment, with many a backward glance at the mirror. But, as she returns, in the middle of the room she comes to a sudden stop, and a deadly pallor overspreads her face. Trembling and reeling in her gait, she totters to a seat, which she only reaches just in time to save her from falling to the ground.

"She is in a fit!" cries the old dame, and begins

muttering a prayer. But soon she leaves off muttering, and raises a shriek of terror; for now an appalling change comes over the princess: her eyes are rolling in their sockets, her lips are frothing with white foam, and her face is ghastly and rigid. Forthwith the whole house is filled with the patter of hurrying feet: one runs to call the King, another to carry the news to Jason. For a little space the maiden lies writhing in speechless agony; then, with a horrible cry, she springs to her feet, and rushes wildly round the room, tossing her head to shake off the fatal crown, which is now gnawing into her brain like a serpent of fire; while the envenomed robe clings closer and closer, devouring her tender flesh with invisible fangs. Her desperate struggles only quicken the action of the deadly drug; and at last she sinks exhausted on the floor, where she lies without sense or motion, marred and disfigured beyond all recognition.

Just at this moment her father rushes into the room, and, flinging himself down by her side, embraces her prostrate form with piteous cries. But when he seeks to raise her from the ground he finds himself caught in the same hideous snare which has destroyed his child. The folds of the robe close round him like clinging ivy, rending the flesh from his bones; and father and child lie locked together until the subtle fire has dried up blood and marrow, and nothing is left but one charred and indiscriminate mass.

VII

Meanwhile Medea remains in the garden, waiting for the return of her children. Presently she sees them hastening towards her, hand in hand, with merry laugh and dancing steps. They are too young to understand the stormy passions which are raging over their heads; as yet they know nothing of their mother's banishment, and they are full of joy at their kind reception by the princess.

"Ay, children," she sighs, when she has learnt the success of their mission, "ye have now a city and a home where ye shall dwell for ever parted from your mother. But I must leave you, and live apart in a distant land, before ever I have reaped the fruits of my anxious toil and care, I shall not lift on high the torch on your marriage day or help to deck your happy brides. And when old age and death overtake me, I shall be carried to the tomb by strangers' hands."

She still plays with the thought that the boys are to live in Corinth with their father. Love and hate are yet striving for the mastery within her, and for a moment it seems as if the natural feelings of the mother would win the day. For as she looks in the bright faces of her children, and feels the soft touch of those baby fingers on her cheeks, a flood of tenderness overpowers her, and she sets them gently down, murmuring: "I cannot—I cannot do it."

But those who have long been slaves to some master passion can seldom break their chain. While Medea sits gazing intently at the little ones, as if seeking to imprint their image on her heart, gradually, as when a cloud passes over the sun, all softness fades out of her face, and her brow becomes as black as night. "They have the very look of their father," she mutters. "It is an accursed breed; I will not suffer them to live." The powers of darkness have triumphed, and the last spark of human feeling is stifled in that savage heart. "Go ye to yonder thicket," she says sharply and sternly, pointing to a remote corner of the spacious palace grounds, "and wait there till I come. I have something more to say unto you before I depart." The children shrink in terror from her angry glances, and make their way in silence to the spot pointed out to them, while Medea retires to the palace to make her last preparations.

These are soon finished, and before many minutes she is stealing back towards the place to which she has sent the children, holding a dagger hidden in the folds of her dress. While she is thus speeding on her errand of death, with every thought concentrated on her dreadful purpose, she hears someone running behind her, and calling her name. Glancing over her shoulder, she perceives one of Jason's domestics hurrying towards her. "What seekest thou of me?" she asks impatiently. "Fly, Medea—fly!" pants the

man, in wild excitement. "The princess and her father have been slain by thy device, and Jason is seeking thee to drag thee to death." "'Tis well," answers Medea coldly. "Tell thy master he shall see me shortly; at present I have other work to do." With that she leaves the man standing in mute amazement, and, passing down a winding avenue of sycamores, disappears from view.

She has not been gone long when Jason rushes up to the spot, crying: "Where is she? Show me the murderess that I may slay her." The man points in the direction taken by Medea, and Jason, unsheathing his sword, runs down the avenue in pursuit. All at once, from the open ground which skirts the garden, comes a piercing shriek; twice, and a third time, it is repeated; then all is still. Frantic with terror he struggles through a dense thicket, across a meadow, and up the steep side of a little hill. Reaching the top he sees a sight which freezes his blood with horror. In a little hollow, not a stone's throw from the summit, stands Medea, with a blood-stained dagger in her hand, and at her feet lie the bodies of her children, still quivering in the last throes of death.

"Thou fiend!" he cries, with a yell of rage. "Thou hast slain my bride, thou hast slain my children, now thou shalt die." And he hurls himself down the hillside, sword in hand. But within a few steps of his intended victim his headlong career is suddenly arrested, and he halts,

paralysed by some unseen force. "Why dost thou pause?" asks Medea, in mocking tones. "Poor fool! dost thou feel my power at last? Hast thou learnt what it is to play the knave with a daughter of the sun, to steal her heart away, and then fling her off for the first baby face which catches thy truant fancy?" Her form seems to dilate, and in her eyes there blazes an unearthly light, as she stands before him, making weird gestures with her arms, and murmuring in an unknown tongue the words of a mystic spell. Thereupon a great darkness comes over his eyes; in his ears there is a roaring sound; then his senses forsake him altogether, and he sinks to the earth in a death-like swoon. When he recovers, he finds himself lying on the spot where he fell, but not a sign of Medea or the slaughtered children is to be seen. Pallid and feeble, like one who has just risen from his bed after a long sickness, he crawls slowly back to the palace.

And this was the last that was seen of Medea in Corinth. But an old shepherd, who was tending his flocks on the hills which surround the city, told a strange story of a chariot drawn by dragons, which had appeared flying over his head in the direction of Athens; and in it sat Medea, with the dead bodies of her children by her side.

II.—ALCESTIS

"Methought I saw my late espousèd saint
Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave,
Whom Jove's great son to her glad husband gave,
Rescued from death by force, though pale and faint."

MILTON.

ÆSCULAPIUS was a famous physician, endowed with more than mortal skill by his father Apollo. But he was tempted by gold to transgress the lawful bounds of his art, and bring back the dead to life; and Zeus in anger smote him with his thunderbolt, and slew him. Apollo was sore grieved at the loss of his son, and in revenge he killed the Cyclopes, who forged the thunderbolts for Zeus; and as a punishment he was condemned to serve for a whole year as a herdsman to Admetus, King of Pheræ, in Thessaly. The divine herdsman was treated with all due reverence and courtesy by his mortal master, who at the end of the year was rewarded by a peculiar privilege. Being on the point of death he was granted exemption from his doom, and a double period of years, on condition that he could find another to die for him. Among all his friends and relations one

only was found who was willing to make the sacrifice for him. This was Alcestis, his wife.

I

The hour is come, and Apollo is about to leave the house where he has worked out his penance under the gentle prince; for the pale shadow of death is stealing over that once happy home, and the young god of light and joy flies from the approach of disease and decay. As he crosses the threshold a pale, spectral figure stands in the way, holding in his hand a drawn sword. A chill, damp air, as from a tomb, invades the warm glow of noon; and the very sun grows dim in that awful presence. "Who art thou?" demands Apollo, stepping back a pace. "My name is Death," answers the spectre in a hollow voice. "I have come to take my own. But what doest thou here, and why art thou armed with that silver bow? Hast thou come to cheat me again of my due?" "Fear nothing," answers Apollo; "I would win thee by persuasion, not by force." "Win me to what?" asks the grisly power. "To give up my prey? Nevermore!" "No; but to take the old and spare the young," replies Apollo. "That may not be," says the shade; "Alcestis is mine, and I am come to take her. Moreover," he adds, with a ghastly smile, "I love to take the young

in their beauty and their bloom." "Abhorrèd monster!" cries Apollo, with a look of loathing, "thou shalt yet be foiled. There is one who shall snatch from thee thy prize, and wring from thee by force the favour which thou refusest to my prayer." "Rail as thou wilt," replies Death; "thou shalt not save the woman from her fate. I go to cut the lock from her forehead,[1] and consecrate her for the tomb." "Go, then," says Apollo; "I will not dispute with thee further, for I know that thy errand shall be in vain." With this last warning he departs; and the King of Terrors glides with noiseless step into the house.

II

Over all the palace of Admetus a death-like stillness dwells, broken only by the anxious whispers of a little group of persons standing before the doors. They are citizens of Pheræ, and friends of Admetus, who have come to inquire about the health of the beloved lady, Alcestis. "I fear we come too late," says one, a venerable elder who had nursed the princess on his knee when she was a little child. "The house is silent as the grave; she must have passed away already." "Nay, father, that cannot be," says a bearded warrior in the prime of life, the son of him who spoke

[1] Referring to the custom of cutting a few hairs from the forehead of a victim who was about to be sacrificed.

first; "if she were dead, we should have heard the voice of mourning; and see," he adds, pointing to the vacant threshold, "no lustral water for the hands, no lock of hair before the doors, as is the custom in a house where death has been." "Yet this is the day," observes another, who boasts some skill as a prophet, "when it was appointed for her to die." A murmur of sorrow and sympathy goes round the little group, with broken cries of "Dear lady!" "Kind friend!" "Devoted wife!"

At this moment the door opens, and a young girl, one of the handmaidens of Alcestis, is seen descending the broad marble steps. "No; she is not dead yet," she says in answer to the eager inquiries of the visitors, who now perceive that her eyes are red with weeping; "but she is sinking fast." Then she describes the behaviour of Alcestis when she felt that the hand of death was upon her. "Having made her toilet with more than usual care, she arrayed herself in her best attire, and, standing before the family altar, put up this solemn prayer to the guardian spirit of the house: 'Lady, my hour is come, and with my last breath I entreat thee to watch over my orphan children. Let them not die untimely like their mother, but reach the full measure of their days, crowned with every blessing that life can give.' After that she went from room to room, decking the altar of every household deity with sprays of myrtle. Not a tear, not a sigh, escaped

from her till she came to the chamber where she had slept through all her wedded life. Then she flung herself on the bed, and drenched the pillow with a shower of tears. 'Farewell, my happy home!' she cried; 'farewell, husband of my youth! I have given my life for thee; and thou wilt find another to love thee, not more faithful, but happier, I trust, than me.' She kissed the pillow, with a fresh burst of weeping, and rose to depart; but twice and thrice she turned upon the threshold, and threw herself again on the bed. As she did this for the third time she felt the soft pressure of little arms round her neck and the glow of warm kisses on her cheek, and, looking up, she found her little son and daughter clinging to her, speechless with grief. She clasped them to her heart with murmured words of comfort, and led them to the room where the whole household was assembled to take their last adieu of their gentle mistress. For everyone she had a word of kindness and a warm clasp of the hand."

"But see," says the maiden, breaking off in her narrative, and pointing to the open doorway, "here she comes, leaning on her husband's arm, to take her last look at the sky."

Half led, half supported, by her husband, Alcestis appears at the lofty portal of the palace. Her failing eyes are dazzled by the sunshine, and the fever of her mysterious sickness brings broken visions before her dying sense, in which present,

past, and future are mingled together. "Sunshine and whirling clouds," she murmurs, with wandering gaze turned towards the sky; "Iolcus, dear home of my happy girlhood! that little chamber——" Here she breaks off, and murmurs inaudibly. Then in louder tones: "See, see! 'tis Charon in his two-oared skiff! I hear him call: *Make haste! Why lingerest thou? I cannot wait.* He is angry—he calls again." Another vision succeeds, and now she cries, in accents of terror: "He comes! he comes!—the winged minister of death; he glares at me with baleful eyes, dreadful shape! Unhand me; I will not go." And she struggles in that invisible grasp. "Oh, dark, dark, dark!" she falters again after a long pause; "the sun has gone out—my day is done." And she sinks back in a swoon. She is borne to a couch, where she lies for some time insensible, and her maidens minister to her.

During the preceding scene the visitors from Pheræ have been admitted, and to them Admetus pours out his sorrow and remorse. He is coward enough to let his wife die for him, though he loves her, next to himself, better than all the world. While he is busy cursing his fate, and calling on gods and men to witness how hardly he is dealt with, Alcestis shows signs of returning consciousness; and all ears are now alert to catch her next words.

"Draw near, my husband," she says; and her voice is now firm, though very weak and low,

"Listen to my last words. I have given my life for thee because I loved thee better than life—I, who am still in the bloom of my youth, and might have lived many happy years, if I could have been false to thee. Thy father and thy mother failed thee in thy sore need, though they were already on the verge of the grave; they had but little to lose, and I, who have so much, have given what they refused. Therefore I charge thee, be true to my memory, and remember thy duty to these motherless children. Let no other woman drive my image from thy heart, and trust not these helpless babes to a stepmother's unloving hands."

Admetus replies with fervent protestations of fidelity: no beauty, no wealth, no rank, will ever, he avers, have power to shake his constancy to her who has given her life for him. His whole life shall be one long regret—a sacrifice of sorrow to one dear memory. From the hour when she breathes her last he will never put off the sable weeds of woe, never suffer a sound of joy or mirth to be heard in his house. Skilled artists shall make an image of her, just as she was in life, and he will lay it on a couch, and worship that cold counterfeit, with kisses and soft words of love, for the sake of his dear departed saint. So shall his days be passed, every thought consecrated to one cherished name; and every night all his dreams shall be of her. "Oh, that I had the harp and the tongue of Orpheus," he cries, "that I might follow

thee to the home of the dead, and charm the stern gaoler with my song to give thee back to life! But since that cannot be, I will keep warm my love for thee here; and when this long penance is past, I will join thee on that shadowy shore, and there we will dwell together, never to be parted again."

"You hear him, children?" says Alcestis to the little ones, who stand sobbing by her side. "You are witnesses to his promise that he will never wed again." "Never, never," repeats Admetus; "I swear it." "Then take them to thy heart," says Alcestis, "and remember that thou art now to be father and mother to them."

She is now sinking fast, and her eyes are growing dim and heavy. Perceiving this, Admetus loses all self-control; he clasps her convulsively in his arms, crying: "I cannot live without thee; thou shalt not die. Look at me—speak to me." But it is too late: he cannot save her now, even at the cost of his own life. With one gentle sigh, and one look of unutterable tenderness, that faithful spirit has passed away.

For a long time Admetus stands dumb and motionless in his sorrow, and nothing is heard but the sobs of the children and the whispered words of those who are gathered round the chief mourners. Then the couch with its sad burden is carried to an inner apartment, to await the hour of burial. And Admetus dismisses his friends from the city, after making proclamation of a general mourning to be

observed by all the citizens of Pheræ for the space of a month.

III

While the whole house is busy preparing for the funeral, which is to surpass in magnificence any that has yet been held in the land, a solitary wayfarer is seen ascending the steep road which leads to the palace of Admetus, He is a man of gigantic stature, with limbs cast in a grand heroic mould; his vast frame is wrapped in a lion's hide; and in his hand he bears a mighty club. Pausing before the entrance he inquires of those who are loitering near if Admetus is at home. "He is in the house," replies a servant who has just come out to give some directions about the funeral. "Who art thou, friend, and what seekest thou of our King?" "I am Hercules," replies the stranger; and at the sound of that magic name every voice is hushed, every eye is fixed intently on the speaker. "I am on my way to Thrace, to fetch the horses of Diomede for my cousin Eurystheus." "'Tis no easy task which thou hast taken in hand," remarks one of the bystanders. "I was not born for easy tasks," says Hercules; "all my life is an intense upward striving on a rugged road. But what makes this particular labour so hard?" "Knowest thou not, then," answers the man in surprise, "the nature of these savage beasts? Their mangers are always wet

with recent blood, for they feed on human flesh." "Well, I will find a bridle for them," rejoins the hero, smiling grimly. "But methinks I see thy master coming hither."

As he speaks Admetus appears on the scene. His hair is cropped close, in sign of mourning, and he is dressed all in black. "Hail! noble scion of a race divine," he says, recognising Hercules at once. "And hail to thee, noble King of Thessaly!" returns Hercules. "But I see thou art in mourning. May I ask the cause?" Admetus fences with the question. He will not tell his guest that Alcestis is dead, lest this should be construed into a plea for refusing hospitality to a visitor. So he replies evasively that a woman of his household has died. Hercules at once declares his intention of proceeding to another house; but Admetus presses him warmly to stay, and after some friendly dispute Hercules consents, and is conducted to the guest-chamber in a remote part of the palace, where the sound of lamentation cannot reach his ears. Here he is feasted sumptuously, while Admetus retires to make the last preparations for the burial of his wife.

All is now ready, and the sorrowful procession is about to start from the house, when Pheres, the father of Admetus, joins the company of mourners, with attendants bearing rich offerings to the dead. Greeting Admetus, he condoles with him for the loss of Alcestis, pronounces a high eulogy on that

peerless wife, and proffers his gifts. But Admetus repulses him with scorn and anger. "Uninvited," he says, "hast thou come to this funeral—unsummoned and unwelcome. Go, take thy gifts elsewhere—she shall have none of them. Thou didst stand aloof and leave me to my fate when Death was aiming his dart at me, and now thou comest hither with thy false-mourning face. To prolong thy feeble existence for a few wretched years thou hast suffered the young to die for me; and I count thee as the murderer of my wife."

Pheres is amazed, as well he may be, at this strange passion of selfishness. He answers the reproaches of his son with interest. "A fair return," he replies bitterly, "art thou making for all the benefits which I have heaped upon thee. I have reared thee as a prince and endowed thee with a fine estate, and now thou revilest me because I would not yield up my life for thy sake. I am old, it is true, and but few years of life remain to me, but, therefore, are they all the sweeter. Dost thou think that this life is dear to thee alone—thou who hast played the coward, and flung honour and duty to the winds to save thyself? Thou hast found a fair device to prolong thy days. When Death gapes for thee again, doubtless thou wilt fling another wife into his maw, and steal another lease of life."

For some time father and son continue to wrangle over the corpse of the martyred wife; then their

friends interpose, shocked at such an indecent display, and put an end to this unseemly brawl. Pheres retires in high dudgeon, taking his gifts with him, and the procession proceeds.

IV

Meanwhile Hercules, all unconscious of the great loss which has befallen his friend and host, is holding a solitary revel, and making merry with the good things set before him. The butler, a grave and dignified domestic, is scandalised by the indecency of his behaviour. "Look at the fellow!" he whispers indignantly to one of his underlings—"some highway robber, I should think—coming to my master's house at a time like this, and gorging and swilling as if he were in a tavern. And we have to stay at home, and wait upon him, while my dear mistress is carried to her last resting-place. A kind lady she was, like a mother to her servants, shielding them and taking their part when they were in trouble with the master. And now I cannot take my last look at her or drop a last tear into her coffin." And the faithful old man sobs aloud.

But his lamentations are rudely interrupted by a loud voice from the table; and he hastens to obey the summons, having received strict orders from Admetus to supply all the wants of this

ravenous guest. "Fellow, more wine!" shouts Hercules. "Seest thou not that my cup is empty? And hark you, no three to six,[1] no watery mixtures for me, but the pure blood of Bacchus." The butler obeys, pouring out the rich, red vintage with a visage as solemn as a mute. Hercules tosses it off, calls for another bumper, and, being now warm with his repeated libations, strikes up a jolly song, in a voice like the bellowing of the north wind. This is too much for the feelings of the respectable butler, and he allows his displeasure to appear plainly on his face. "How now?" cries Hercules, breaking off his song. "What means that solemn look? Is this the way in which you treat your master's guests?" "Your pardon, sir," answers the man. "There is death in the house, and I was thinking of our loss." "Ay," replies Hercules; "I heard something of that from the Lord Admetus —some stranger who was dwelling in his house had died, he said. But what of that? All men must die some day. Who knows if we ourselves shall be alive to-morrow? Away with care! Sit down, and take a cup with me, and I will sing thee another song to drive away this black humour." "Alas! sir, I cannot drink with thee," says the butler; "my heart is too heavy."

Hercules begins to perceive that something has

[1] Wine was generally drunk mixed with water, in the proportion of six of water to three of wine. To drink unmixed wine was regarded as gross intemperance.

been kept from him. Such grief as the old servant expresses implies a much nearer and dearer loss than that of which he has heard. He questions the man closely, and at last wrings from him the truth: while he has been filling himself with meat and wine, the whole family of Admetus has been paying the last sad tribute of sorrow by the open grave of Alcestis. Instantly his mood changes. He shakes off the fumes of the wine which he has swallowed, tears the myrtle wreath from his head, and, springing from his seat, demands to know the place where Alcestis is buried. "By the wayside, in the suburbs," answers the butler, "where the road runs to Larissa."

"Now up, my soul!" cries Hercules, no longer a drunkard and glutton, but the true son of Zeus. "We must go wrestle a round with Death, and bring back the brave lady to the arms of her lord. I shall find that goblin at the tomb drinking the fresh blood of the victims. Then shall he give up to me his prize, or his sides shall crack for it, for I will never let go my grasp until he has restored his prey to me. And if I do not find him there, I will go down to the sunless realm of the Maid[1] and her King, and methinks I shall persuade them, and bring her back. Nobly has Admetus behaved to me in the hour of his bitter loss, and nobly he shall be rewarded."

[1] Persephone (Proserpine), wife of Pluto, king of the lower world.

Hercules' Struggle with Death

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V

Admetus is weak and selfish, but not heartless. His affection for Alcestis is pure and tender, and now that he has lost her he is quite broken-hearted. At the funeral he was with difficulty restrained from throwing himself into the grave, and when the ceremony was over his friends were obliged to carry him, almost by force, back to the house.

"Woe, woe is me!" he cries as he crosses the threshold of his widowed home. "Would that I had never been born! The light is gone out of my life, and I shall never know an hour of joy again." His friends gather round him with commonplace topics of consolation: what must be, must; gods and men alike have to bow to the iron law of necessity; other men have lost their wives —let him be thankful that he has saved his own life. But he will not be comforted. "Would that I had never married!" he moans, looking round the room, where every object reminds him of *her*, and pierces him with a fresh pang. "If the single life knows no happiness, it knows no sorrow either." Then he thinks of the day when he brought his young wife home, amid the blazing of torches and the glad sounds of the loud hymeneal anthem. "What a change," he says, with a bitter sigh, "from that merry troop of wedding guests to this throng of mourning faces! Instead of the bride-

groom's white robe, this sable dress; instead of the marriage hymn, this funeral dirge!"

And now a dark picture of the future rises before him, wringing from him a wilder burst of anguish. "I am full of woes," he wails, "I have no room for more. Whither shall I go, or to whom shall I turn, for comfort? Shall I seek it in my own home, in the empty chair where once she sat; in the tear-stained faces of my children, in the eyes of my servants, turned on me in mute reproach? Shall I seek it abroad, in the busy haunts of men, where every wife and mother will point the finger of scorn at me, and cry aloud the tale of my shame? Oh, base, base, base! I have thrown away everything —my honour, my manhood, my good name—and henceforth I must live in utter wretchedness and infamy." Here the unhappy man breaks off, overcome by his emotions, and, hiding his face, abandons himself to the extremity of grief. His sorrow, though loud, is sincere: he has learnt at last that life itself may be purchased at too high a price.

VI

In the midst of this scene of hopeless desolation and misery Hercules suddenly reappears, bringing with him a woman, closely veiled. After gently upbraiding Admetus for the deception which had led him to make so untimely a display of merri-

ment, he proceeds to explain the reason of his sudden return. "I come," he says, "to ask shelter and protection for this maiden, whom I have just now won as a prize in a wrestling match. When I come back from Thrace I will turn aside at Pheræ, and claim her again; or if aught untoward befall me (which heaven forbid!) let her remain here and be thy handmaid."

"If I deceived thee," answers Admetus, "I did it in kindness, and to save my house from reproach. But as for this maiden, I beseech thee to find a home for her in some other friend's house. How can I receive guests at this time of mourning? And how can she dwell here in honour, now that my wife is dead? How shall I guard her, or myself, from the tongue of slander? This is no place for a maiden of gentle birth and nurture, as I perceive her to be."

Up to this point Admetus has hardly looked at the veiled figure. He is absorbed in the sense of his own loss, and his eyes are dim with weeping. But now, happening to glance in her direction, he starts violently, and, roused from his attitude of listless apathy, exclaims with great excitement: "This is the very form and fashion of my wife Alcestis; surely it is some mocking vision, which the gods have sent, to fill up the measure of my woe. Take her, I implore thee, from my sight; every look is a new stab to my wounded heart!"

"Thy wound is green," says Hercules compassion-

ately; "wait for the great healer, Time." "There is but one who can make me whole," answers Admetus, "the great healer, Death." "Thou wilt find comfort in another woman's love." "Peace! Let me not hear that impious word again." "What, waste thy days in worship of the dead?" "My heart is in the grave: there let it dwell."

"I praise thy constancy," replies Hercules, "though I fear the world will give it another name. But come now, let me pray thee to take this lady into thy house; believe me, I have my own reasons for urging this request." "Well, have it as thou wilt," says Admetus, overcome by this importunity. "Take the maiden with you into the women's quarters," he adds, addressing the handmaidens of Alcestis. "No, no," interposes Hercules; "I must give her into thy hands—no other shall touch her." And, taking the maiden by the hand, he leads her up to Admetus, who stands with averted face, and arms outstretched as if to ward off some deadly thing. But Hercules will take no denial: he seizes the reluctant fingers of Admetus, and closes them round the slender right hand of the silent figure. "Now take her, and keep her," he cries, removing the veil which hides her face; "she is thy very own. Is she at all like thy wife?" "What is this?" gasps Admetus, gazing in wonder on those well-loved features, from which the shadow of death has hardly passed. "Am I mocked? Do I dream? Is this some phantom sent to drive me mad?" "No

phantom," answers Hercules, "but thy true wife, whom I rescued with these hands from the icy clutch of Death. I lay in wait for him by the tomb, and when he came for his booty I fell upon him, and overcame him; and there thou holdest the spoils of my victory in thine arms."

All this time Alcestis has lain pale and drooping in her husband's embrace, without uttering a word. "Why does she not speak?" asks Admetus, gazing anxiously on her face. "Thou shalt not hear her voice," replies Hercules, "till all due rites have been paid to the nether powers and she has been cleansed from the stain of death. After that three days must pass, and then her tongue shall be loosed. But fare thee well; I may not tarry longer here: northward lies my path, and a hard struggle awaits me at my journey's end." And, declining a pressing invitation from Admetus to stay and take part in the great feast of thanksgiving which is to follow, the great hero bids adieu to his kind host, promising to pay him another visit on his return from Thrace.

III.—HECUBA

"Yes, Insolence, Injustice, every crime,
Rapine and Wrong, may prosper for a time;
Yet shall they travel on to swift decay,
Who tread the crooked path and hollow way."

JOHN H. FRERE, from THEOGNIS.

I

ON the shore of the Thracian Chersonese, opposite the coast of Troy, the Grecian host is assembled, waiting for the signal to set sail for home. The whole coast is dotted with innumerable tents, and the ships are drawn up in lines along the beach. Troy has fallen, all her wealth is divided among the victors, and those of her children who survive must now learn the hard lessons of slavery.

It is the ghostly hour of morning twilight; captive and captor are buried in slumber, and not a sound is heard throughout the camp save the slow tread of the sentinels and the low murmur of the sea. Suddenly the curtains of the tent assigned to the female slaves of Agamemnon are drawn aside, and an aged woman, of queenly presence, but bowed with years and sorrows, comes halting out upon the dewy grass, leaning heavily on the shoulders of two younger women, who support her

on either side. "Ah! my children," she says, shuddering in the chill morning air, "my heart is exceeding heavy; the day brings me no solace and the night is full of terror. One child I had, of all my sons and daughters, who I thought beyond the reach of woe and peril, Polydorus, who was sent by my husband, Priam, with great store of gold, to Polymestor, a prince of this land, that he might be preserved to carry on the royal race. But last night I had a dream, which bodes evil to him, and to Polyxena, my daughter, now a captive in the Grecian camp. I thought I saw a dappled fawn, which fled to my knees for refuge, pursued by a wolf; and I sought to save her, but that ravenous beast tore her from by arms, and devoured her before mine eyes. And what is this rumour which I heard, that the ghost of Achilles had appeared above his tomb, and demanded a daughter of Troy to be sacrificed as his portion of the booty? Let it not be a child of mine! Spare me—oh, spare me that last and bitterest pang, ye powers of heaven, I beseech you." Here she ceased, gazing with eyes of anguish on the fading stars.

Standing thus, with hands uplifted, in an attitude of prayer, she hears the sound of light footsteps approaching the tents of Agamemnon, and presently she is surrounded by a company of Trojan maidens, who have stolen away from their masters' tents to bring tidings of new sorrow to their fallen queen. The rumour which Hecuba has heard is only too

true, and her worst fears are realised. Just as the Greeks were preparing to set sail, the ghost of Achilles, clad in all his golden armour, was seen standing on the mound which had been raised in his honour on the Thracian shore, and his voice was heard, forbidding them to depart until they had appeased his angry spirit with the blood of the maiden Polyxena. Then a great strife arose among the princes, and some were for making the sacrifice, and some were against it. Agamemnon especially spoke on the side of mercy, moved by the entreaties of Cassandra,[1] his captive, whom he held in high esteem for her beauty and prophetic gifts. Opinions were equally divided, when Odysseus, the great enemy of Troy, stood up, and employed all his eloquence to plead the cause of Achilles. "Let it not be said," he urged, raising his mighty voice so as to be heard by the whole assembled army, "that for the sake of one woman, and she a slave, we left our noblest warrior deprived of his due meed. Let not the reproach be current among our fallen comrades, who now dwell in that shadowy land of spirits, that we, for whom they fought and died, left the shores of Troy branded with the hateful name of *ingrate*." And the words of Odysseus prevailed; for the mob was on his side, and he knew that he was giving utterance to the wishes of that swarming multitude, now impatient to be gone.

Loud and wild was the grief of that sore afflicted

[1] Daughter of Priam and Hecuba, and sister of Polyxena.

mother when she learnt the cruel sentence pronounced upon her child. "All, all is taken from me," she wailed—"my husband, my home, my children. And she, my last and my dearest, whom I thought to have saved—she too must walk on the same dark road. Polyxena, my daughter, come forth, and hear of the blow which is aimed at thy young life."

Roused by the cries of her mother, Polyxena issues from the tent, where she has been sleeping the calm sleep of youth and innocence. Seeing her mother in tears, she embraces her tenderly. "What new sorrow is this?" she asks in soothing tones. "Why hast thou startled me from my warm nest?" she adds, with playful reproach, all unconscious of the terrors which surround her. With a voice broken by sobs and low cries, Hecuba falters out the dreadful tidings which she has just received. "They will take thy life, my darling; they will take thy life," she murmurs in a voice of agony. "The Greeks—have decreed—that thou must die —at the tomb—of Achilles."

When she hears the fatal message, uttered in short, gasping phrases, Polyxena stands transfixed, like one who has received her death blow. But even at this terrible moment her first thought is not for herself. "Oh, my poor mother," she cries, "what a life of woe is thine! When will heaven cease to rain sorrows on thine afflicted head? Thou must go into captivity alone, and I, who thought to comfort thee, and ease thy heavy burden, shall be

lying far away in my cold grave. I could welcome death for myself, as far better than a life of shame, but I cannot bear to die, and leave thee desolate."

While Polyxena and her mother are still mingling their sorrows, the flash of arms is seen among the tents, and Odysseus enters, attended by a file of spearmen. Without a sign of pity or compunction he briefly announces the nature of his hateful errand. "I come," he says, "at the command of the army, to fetch thy daughter for the sacrifice. Be wise, therefore, and compel me not to use force: thou knowest that it is useless."

Thus brought face to face with her worst enemy, Hecuba with a great effort compels herself to speak humbly and submissively. "May a slave," she asks, "speak one word, and put one question, which will not offend her master's ears?" "Say on," replies Odysseus; "time presses not." Hecuba proceeds accordingly. "Dost thou remember the day when thou camest as a spy to Troy, foully disguised in the rags of a beggar, wounded and bleeding in the face, like a slave who has run away from a barbarous master? And Helen recognised thee, and came and told me who thou wast. Thy life was in my hand that day; and when thou knewest it, thou didst throw thyself at my feet, begging me not to betray thee; thou didst cling to my gown, and I felt thy hand trembling, and cold as ice. And I hearkened to thy prayer, and spared thee, and sent thee in safety out of the town."

"I cannot deny it," answers Odysseus: "I owe thee my life." "And is this thy return for that good service?" continues Hecuba in warmer tones. "And wilt thou pay thy debt to me by robbing me of my child? Oh, ye are a thankless breed, ye who are ever attentive to catch the people's ear—ye who read your history in the eyes of the mob! A fair device, to slaughter a helpless maiden, like a beast of sacrifice, at your hero's tomb! What wrong has she wrought Achilles that he calls for her blood? If he requires a victim, why does he not demand the life of Helen? She is the true author of his death. And if it is beauty that he seeks, who is so fair as she? So much for the justice of his plea; and now I turn to thee, Odysseus, who wast once my suppliant, as I am now thine. Remember what thou owest to me, and tear not from me this last prop and stay of my weary age. Think that thou mayest be one day even as I am—I who was once the Queen of broad Asia, the mother of princes, the idol of all who saw me. Thy tongue is mighty in the army: let it be heard in the cause of mercy and pity, and save thy comrades from the stain of a cowardly murder."

"Her words would move a heart of stone," whispers one of the Trojan ladies who are standing by. But no appeal to humanity can reach the heart of the arch-dissembler; he knows how to varnish over his savage purpose with grave reasons of State policy. "I will not disown my debt to

thee," he declares, "and when thou art in need of my help, thou shalt have it. But I have given my word to my dead comrade, Achilles, and I will not break it. If we neglect the honour which is due to the mighty dead, who have shed their blood in the service of their country, who will care henceforth to face the toils and perils of war, when coward and brave are held of like account? The fame which follows us in life is a vain and transitory thing, passing away like a shadow, but the fame which lives after us endures for ever, shining like a star in the dark dwelling of the dead. And this is the prize for which every elect spirit toils and suffers, scorning the things which delight meaner men. It is true that thine is a hard case, but consider how many have endured losses as grievous as thine own. The whole land of Greece is in mourning for her bravest and fairest, and thy tears are as one drop in a great sea of woe. I know that my words seem to you as idle tales—ye of Asia look on these things with other eyes than ours—but we are Greeks, who look before and after, and measure life by a loftier scale."

Odysseus pauses, well pleased with his own eloquence; but his words fall coldly on the ears of that poor mother, to whom they have no more meaning than distant thunder heard in the mountains. "I have been speaking to the wind," she says in sad perplexity; "do thou, my daughter, plead thine own cause. Make thy voice as sweet as the

nightingale's, and try if thou canst move this man's heart; he is a father too, and perchance he will listen to thee."

Odysseus turns away to avoid this new appeal; his face is cold and stern, and he keeps his right hand wrapped tightly in his robe, shunning the suppliant's touch. Polyxena looks at him sadly, but firmly. "Fear me not," she says; "I will not vex thee with supplications and tears. I will go with thee, both because I must and because I wish to die. What hope, what joy, is left to me on earth that I should wish to live? Shall I, who was bred a princess, and waited on with bated breath and whispering reverence, stoop to become the bond-slave of some rude spearman, and spend my life in menial service, kneading bread and sweeping the floor and spinning wool, at the beck of a proud Grecian dame? Yea; and worse things await me —shame, bitter shame, of which I will not speak. Not so! Either I will live with honour, or with honour die. Take me then, Odysseus, and do thy will; and thou, my mother, seek not to hinder him by word or deed."

Hecuba gazes admiringly on her child as she utters these heroic words, worthy of the daughter of a king. Then all the mother's love swells up in her heart, and she makes one more attempt to save her darling. "Let me die for her," she cries. "I am the mother of Paris, who slew Achilles with his arrows." "It cannot be," answers Odysseus;

"Achilles asks for her, not thee." "Then I will die with her," cries Hecuba, flinging her arms round Polyxena, and clinging to her convulsively. "If ye slay her ye must slay me also, for I will never loose my hold." "Nay, mother," says Polyxena gently. "What avails this frantic passion? Wilt thou provoke these men to use violence, and tear us apart with their rude hands? Come, lay thy cheek against mine, and kiss me, and give me thy blessing; thou wilt never see me again alive."

Overcome by that thought, Polyxena for the first time gives way to her grief, and lies sobbing in her mother's arms. But soon she recovers her firmness, and, disengaging herself gently, draws her veil over her face. "I am ready," she says to Odysseus. "The bitterness of death is past. Farewell, my mother; farewell, glad light of day: I have no portion in thee any more." Odysseus takes her hand, and leads her away. Hecuba stands staring after them, like a figure of stone, then, with a last despairing cry, falls fainting to the ground.

II

The whole host of Hellas is assembled round the tomb of Achilles, waiting for the sacrifice. On the summit of the high barrow stands Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, ready to strike the blow, and immediately beneath him the princes and captains are gathered in a grim circle round its foot. Con-

spicuous among the latter appears Agamemnon, thinking of that other sacrifice which he had to witness ten years ago, when the fleet was anchored at Aulis.

A distant murmur is heard among that multitude of warriors from the direction of the sea; it grows louder and louder, until it is taken up by every mouth, crying: "She comes! She comes!" A wavering line is seen among those dense masses of spearmen, drawing nearer and nearer to the mound in their centre. Then a lane is opened in the nearest ranks, and Polyxena ascends the hill, closely attended by Odysseus and his men. Odysseus draws off with his escort, and takes his place among the other chieftains; and now they stand together, side by side, the son of Achilles and the daughter of Priam. Neoptolemus takes a golden bowl, and amid a death-like silence his voice is heard in prayer: "Give ear, son of Peleus, my sire, Achilles, and receive these offerings which I pour to raise thy spirit. Come hither, and drink the pure blood of a stainless maid presented unto thee by the army and by me; and be thou gracious unto us, and give us a fair voyage home from the land of Troy." Saying this he poured the drink-offering on the ground, and all the host repeated his prayer. Then he drew his golden-hilted sword from its sheath, and beckoned to the chosen youths who stood ready to hold the maid. But when she saw that signal she lifted up her voice, and spake aloud, so that all might

hear: "Ye men of Greece, let no one lay his hand on me. I will not falter or blench; only let me die as a free maiden and the daughter of a king, and not be called slave among the dead." Thereupon the people raised a great shout, and Agamemnon bade the young men to stand off; and she, when she heard it, flung off her outer robe, and stood like a statue, with all the beauty of her maiden form revealed. Then sinking on her knee, and gazing sadly on the son of Achilles, she pointed to her throat and breast, and said: "Strike; I am ready; here, if thou wilt, or here." The blow fell, and she sank, mindful to the last of her maiden dignity, at her slayer's feet. Instantly a great commotion arose among those thronging thousands, and one vied with another who should be the first to pay some tribute of honour to her who had made so gallant an end. Some brought wreaths and flowers, and showered them upon her body; others fetched logs of pine, and raised a vast funeral pyre.

While all were thus busy, and every voice sang the praises of that peerless maid, Agamemnon sent his herald Talthybius to carry the news of her death to Hecuba. He found her lying in the place where she fell, still and motionless as the recumbent statue on a tomb, and her maidens, who had tried in vain to rouse her, standing sadly by. Kneeling down by her side he touched her gently, and said: "Rise, hapless Queen, and hear the message which I bring from my master Agamemnon." "Thou art wel-

come, friend," answers Hecuba, feebly lifting her head, "if thou comest to carry me to my death." "I come to bid thee to thy daughter's funeral, and to tell thee how she died," replies Talthybius, and goes on to describe the scene which we have just witnessed. Hecuba, who meanwhile has risen to her feet, listens intently to the herald's narrative, and when it is finished she says, with a heavy sigh: "One little gleam of comfort thou hast brought me in this black night of sorrow, telling me that my daughter died so nobly, and upheld the honour of an ancient name. Now go back to the army, and bid them take heed that none touches my daughter's body until I come and prepare her with my own hands for the tomb. Go thou," she adds, speaking to an aged handmaid who stands near, "take a pitcher, and bring water from the sea, that I may wash her wounds, and lay her out for burial. 'Tis little we can do, in our fallen state, to show our love and reverence, but we must do what we can. Therefore, if any of you Trojan ladies hath aught of jewellery or fine raiment saved from the spoil of our city, let her bring it as an offering to the dead. Though all our glory be passed away, let us not, so far as in us lies, be found wanting in our duty to our dearest and our best."

Note to the Illustration

The story of the sacrifice of Polyxena is varied in the different myths which tell of it. Another form is depicted in the beautiful group of statuary shown in the illustration. Neoptolemus is here

represented as forcibly abducting Polyxena, while Hecuba pleads in vain for the life of her daughter, and Polydorus, to complete the tragic situation, lies dead at their feet.

III

But fresh sorrows are awaiting the hapless Queen of Troy. She is still occupied inside the tent with the preparations for Polyxena's funeral, when the woman who was sent to fetch water is seen returning from the sea followed by men who carry a covered bier. The old dame is in wild agitation, and she calls aloud for Hecuba. "Oh! crowned with woes above all the daughters of men, come forth, and see what heaven hath sent thee." "What means this ill-omened summons?" answers Hecuba, coming out of the tent. "Why art thou bringing hither the body of my daughter Polyxena?" she adds, pointing to the bier. "It is not Polyxena, but another," moans the woman, weeping aloud. "Can it be Cassandra, the prophetic maid?" asks Hecuba, approaching the bier with trembling steps. "Ah me! what a sight is this!" she cries, uncovering the corpse. "Polydorus, my son! too true was the vision which I saw concerning thee. Say, where didst thou find the body?" "Lying on the beach, washed ashore by the waves," answers the aged handmaid. "I see—I see it all," cries Hecuba again. "He was slain by the King of Thrace, into whose keeping Priam gave him. He murdered him for his gold. Look at these hideous wounds! See

how the ruffian has carved and hacked his fair young limbs!"

"Hush! lady; here comes the King," whispers one of her handmaidens, plucking her robe; and as she speaks, a man of stately presence enters the scene. It is Agamemnon himself, come to inquire the cause of Hecuba's delay. "Hecuba," he says, "thy daughter lies waiting for burial. We have obeyed thy message brought by Talthybius, and suffered none to touch her. But who is this?" he asks, pointing to the body. "A Trojan, I see, by his raiment."

Hecuba answers not a word; she is lost in thought, and stands muttering and murmuring to herself. She feels that she has reached a crisis in her life. Her temper, naturally haughty and imperious, so far from being broken, is hardened and steeled by these repeated shocks. All the channels of her love are dried up, and henceforth she will have room for but one thought—the thought of a deep and dire revenge. Agamemnon notes with wonder her wild gestures and broken words, which show that some strange passion is working within her. Long she gazes doubtfully on the King's face; then, hesitating no longer, she throws herself at his feet, and clasping his right hand, implores him to grant her one request. "What request?" answers he with some impatience. "Be brief; my time is precious. Dost thou desire thy liberty? If so, it is thine." "Not liberty, but vengeance," replies Hecuba. "Give

me but that, and I am willing to die a slave. Seest thou this corpse? It is the body of Polydorus, who was slain by his guardian, Polymestor, for his gold. This man was an ancient friend and guest of my husband Priam; many a time he has sat at my table, second to none among those whom the King delighted to honour. And in requital for these benefits he has murdered the last of my sons, and flung him unburied on the waves. If this deed go unpunished, then is justice but an empty name. I charge thee, as heaven's vicegerent and guardian of the law, give ear unto my prayer. Let thy heart incline in pity unto me, now fallen so low, discrowned, dishonoured, reft of all. Oh, turn not from me!" she cries in desperation, as Agamemnon tries to free himself from her grasp. "Would that every part of me had a tongue—my hands, my head, and every hair upon it—that I might besiege thine ears with a thousand voices, and weary thee by importunity until thou hadst yielded thy consent."

It is a strange picture. Within sight of the smoking ruins of Troy, Hecuba is kneeling at the feet of Priam's greatest enemy, clinging to him as if he were the only friend left to her in the world. Agamemnon is not unmoved. "I would willingly help thee," he says, "but I fear the reproaches of my own people if I lift my hand against Polymestor, who is our ally, for the sake of one whom they only know as the son of Priam, chief among our foes." "Thou needest not lift

thy hand against him," answers Hecuba. "I ask thy connivance, not thy help. Do nothing—that is all I require—and leave the rest to me." "Why, what canst thou do?" asks Agamemnon, looking with pity on the white hairs and withered form of Hecuba, who stills kneels before him. "Leave that to me," repeats Hecuba; "I am not so helpless as I seem. I will find the means to accomplish my purpose, if only thou wilt stand aside, and let me work unhindered." "'Tis granted," answers Agamemnon. "The wind is contrary, and we cannot yet sail, so that I lose no time by granting thy request. I will postpone the burial of Polyxena until thou hast finished. And I wish thee good luck, for in avenging thine own wrongs thou art performing an act of public justice."

As soon as he is gone, Hecuba takes prompt steps to carry out her plan. All her apathy has left her; she is no longer a woman broken with years and sorrows, but an outraged mother, to whom the voice of her son's blood calls aloud for vengeance. "Go quickly," she says to the woman who found the body of Polydorus, "and carry my message to Polymestor. Say unto him that Hecuba, the former Queen of Troy, bids him come hither, and bring his children with him, for she has a matter of deep import both to him and to her, which she is keeping for his ear alone." The woman departs, and Hecuba retires into the tent to make all ready for her guest.

IV

The day is drawing towards afternoon, when a clamour of voices outside the women's quarters announces that the expected visitor has arrived. Hecuba, whose ears have long been on the alert to catch that welcome sound, comes forth to greet him, masking her feelings with a ready smile. "Do I behold thee, Priam's ancient friend?" she says, taking his hand. "Thou seest how altered is my state since last we met in Troy." "Ay," answers Polymestor, who is a man past middle age, clothed in barbaric splendour, accompanied by his sons, and attended by a small retinue. "Sad times, my Queen—sad times indeed! My eyes are dim with tears when I behold thee thus. I was returning from a journey to a distant part of my kingdom, when I met thy messenger, and learnt for the first time of thy fallen fortunes, else had I been with thee long before. But what ails thee?" he asks suddenly; for Hecuba, who can hardly restrain herself in that detested presence, shows visible signs of an inward struggle. Her features are working convulsively, and her fingers are outspread, like a bird of prey preparing for the pounce. "'Tis nothing," she answers, collecting herself with an effort. "My sorrows have unnerved me, that is all. Thou knowest how sorely I have been tried." "Nay; 'tis no wonder," answers the hypocrite, with feigned compassion. "But thy

messenger spoke of some business; say, what is it—if thou hast composure to speak of business now." "It is a private matter," says Hecuba, "for thee and thy sons alone. Bid thy attendants retire, and thou shalt hear it."

Polymestor commands his bodyguard to draw off, and when they are out of hearing Hecuba proceeds: "Now I will tell thee; but first let me ask a question of thee: my son Polydorus, is he still living? Is he well?" Polymestor flinches a little before her searching gaze, but he answers cheerfully and without hesitation: "He lives and thrives—here at least fortune favours thee." "And does he still remember his mother?" asks Hecuba, who takes a cat-like pleasure in playing with her intended victim. "So much so," replies Polymestor, "that he tried to run away to thee." "And all the treasure which Priam sent with him?" "Safe, every doit, close guarded by bolt and bar till he comes of age," replies that glib liar. "'Tis well," says Hecuba, with a strange smile. "Now attend: in the citadel of Troy, on the spot where once stood the Temple of Athene, there is buried a great store of gold. The place is marked by a black, solitary stone. This I wished thee to know, that thou mightiest dig up the treasure, and add it to the wealth which thou art keeping for my son." "But why didst thou bid me bring the children with me?" asks Polymestor, whose guilty conscience suggests all sorts of fears. "It is better

that they should know the secret," answers Hecuba, "in case aught happens to thee. But this is not all. Here, in the tent where the women of Troy are housed, I have another private store, saved from the greedy hands of the Greeks. Come with me, and I will give it into thy keeping." "But is all safe?" inquires the coward anxiously, his mind divided between fear and greed. "Are there no men about the place?" "Only the women are there," replies Hecuba. "Fear nothing, but come." And, drawing the curtain of the tent, she enters, followed by Polymestor and his children.

"Be seated," says Hecuba, pointing to an ivory chair of curious workmanship. Polymestor sits down, and gazes about him in the dim light. It is a spacious chamber, filled with a crowd of Trojan women, who come thronging around him with words and gestures of welcome. With female curiosity they examine his arms and dress. One takes his spear, and, after admiring the quaint carving on the shaft, hands it to another, who passes it on to a third; another fingers his robe, as if struck by the fine work of the Thracian looms. Meanwhile the elder women take possession of the children, praising their beauty, and passing them from hand to hand.

In the midst of this pretty scene a sudden devil seems to enter into the women. A dozen hands are armed with daggers, and plunge them into the breasts of the helpless boys; and a hundred

more restrain the furious struggles of Polymestor, who is hurled on the floor, and held fast by hands, and feet, and hair. While he lies thus, half stifled by the weight of those who kneel on him, and glares into the furious faces of his captors, feeling their hot breath on his cheeks, one of the women unclasps the brooch from her dress, and dashes the pin into his eyes; then he feels their hold slacken, and a moment after he is set free. With bleeding face, in darkness, and in agony, he staggers to his feet, and gropes about him, beating the air with his hands, and howling curses and threats. But his persecutors have fled, and he grasps nothing but empty air. As he gropes his way along the walls of the tent he comes to the opening, and feels the rays of the setting sun strike warm upon his face.

"Where be those fiends?" he shrieks, staggering out into the air. "Show me them, that I may rend them limb from limb." "Thou hast found thy deserts," answers Hecuba, standing at a safe distance; "as thou hast done unto me, so have I done unto thee." Polymestor rushes wildly in the direction of the voice; but he finds himself checked by a strong hand, and the voice of Agamemnon, who has been summoned to the spot by news of the tumult, sounds in his ears. "What is this?" asks Agamemnon. "Why do I find thee thus horribly marred? Who has dealt thus with thee?"

At first Polymestor replies only by struggles and savage cries; but presently he grows calmer, and tells how his children were murdered, and he himself blinded, by Hecuba and her women. "And this I have suffered for thy sake," he continues, "because I slew thy enemy, Polydorus. I did it in good will to thee, fearing that when he grew to manhood he might gather the scattered Trojans, and found a new city on the ruins of the old. This would have been a sore trouble to thee; but I have prevented it, and thou seest how I am rewarded."

Hecuba replies, and quickly scatters this specious plea to the winds. "Thou fool!" she says scornfully, "thinkest thou to deceive the King thus? If the cause of Agamemnon and the Greeks was so near thy heart, why didst thou not kill my son while Priam still sat on his throne, and the towers of Ilium stood in power and pride? Why didst thou wait until we had lost all, and my child was left in thy hands without hope of defence? No; it was lust of gold which prompted thee to do this foul deed; and now that thy villainy has come home to thee, thou seekest to gloze it over with this fair pretence of zeal in Agamemnon's cause."

"Thou reasonest well," observes Agamemnon, whose sympathies in this case are all on the side of Hecuba; "the man is fairly unmasked. Among you of Thrace," he adds, fixing a stern eye on

Polymestor, "perhaps it is a small thing to murder a guest; but we Greeks think otherwise, and shame it were to me, a public arbiter of justice, if I gave judgment in thy favour. Blame thyself if thou reapest as thou hast sown."

Thus abandoned and discountenanced on all sides, Polymestor vents his rage in loud revilings against Hecuba and the whole race of women. The Thracians, like many other barbarous peoples, were great prophets, and famous for their gift of second sight; and Polymestor has heard a prophecy foretelling Hecuba's strange end. "Before thou hast lost sight of these shores," he says, "thou shalt be changed into a dog, and run barking about the deck. In this shape thou shalt be stricken with madness, and plunge into the sea, and perish; and that part of the coast shall be named after thee, Cynossema.[1] And now I will tell thee thy doom," says he, turning to Agamemnon. "A violent end awaits thee in thy own home, at the hands of thy wife." "Peace, madman!" answers Agamemnon; "curb thy unruly tongue." "She shall slay thee in thy bath——" "Silence!" thunders Agamemnon. "Away with him; take him out of my sight!" Instantly the wretched man is seized by the King's guards, and hurried, bound and gagged, outside the limits of the camp.

[1] Tomb of the Dog.

PRONOUNCING LIST OF NAMES

Acheron, a'keron
Acheloüs, akelō'us
Acrŏ'pŏlis
Admē'tus
Æetes, ee-ee-tees
Æschylus, ees'kĭlus
Ægis'thus
Ætolia, ee-to'lia
Ægeus, ee-gyoos
Æsculapius, ees-kyoola'pius
Alces'tis
Anaxag'ŏras
Antigone, antigŏnee
Antilochus, antil'okus
Archilochus, arkil'ŏkus
Archelaus, arkĕlā'us
Ares, ā'rees
Arges, argees
Areopagus, areŏ'păgus
Arion, arei'on
Aristophanes, aristŏ'phănees
Artĕmis
Asopus, āsō'-pus
Atreus, ā'troos

Bi'a
Briareos, briă'rĕ-os
Brontes, bron'tees

Calchas, cal'kas
Ceyx, kee'ix
Cenæum, keenee'um
Cephissus, keefiss'us
Chœphoroi, coee'foroi
Charon, kā'rŏn
Chiron, kei'rŏn
Chrysa, crei'sa
Cithæron, kĭthee'rŏn
Clytæmnestra, cleiteemnes'
Colchis, cŏl'kis [tra
Colonus, colō'nus
Cŏttos
Cratos, crăt'os
Creon, cre'ŏn
Cyclopes, seiclō'pees
Cynossema, keinossee'ma

Deianira, dee-ĭ-ănei'ra
Demeter, dee-mee'teer
Dodona, dŏdō'na
Dionysus, dionei'sus
Diomede, di'ŏmeed

Erymanthus, erĭman'thus
Erinyes, erei'nĭ-ēs
Eteocles, ĕt'ĕŏclees
Eubœa, yoobee'a
Eumenides, yoomĕn'ĭdees
Euripides, yooríp'ĭdees
Eurydice, yoorĭdisee
Eurytus, u'rĭtus
Eurystheus, yooris'thyoos
Evenus, eevee'nus

Gæa, gee'a
Glauce, glaussee
Gyes, gei'ees

Hæmon, hee'mŏn
Hecuba, hĕc'ŭbă
Hecate, hĕc'ătee
Helenus, hĕl'ĕnus
Helios, hee'lĭos
Hephæstus, heephees'tus
Hiero, hei'ĕro
Hyllus, hĭll'us
Hypocrites, hippŏ'-critees

Iapetus, i-ăp'-ĕtus
Iole, ei'ŏlee
Iolcos, eiŏl'cos
Iphigenia, ĭfĭgĕnei'a
Iphitus, if-ĭtus
Ismene, ismee'nee

Laius, lā'-ĭ-us
Lærtes, lā-ĕr-tees
Lichas, lei'cas
Locris, lŏ'cris

Mæotis, meeō'tis
Medea, meedee'a
Menelaus, mĕnnĕlā'-us
Megara, mĕg'ără

Neoptolemus, neoptŏl'ĕmus
Nereids, neer'-ĕ-ids

Oceanus, osĕ'ănus
Œdipus, ee'dĭpus
Œchalia, eecăl'ĭă
Œta, ee'tă
Œneus, ee'nyoos
Omphale, omphă'lee
Oresteia, orĕstei'ă

Paros, pă'ros
Patroclus, pătrŏ'clus
Peirene, pei-ree'nee
Pelops, pĕl'ops
Periander, periand'er
Pericles, pĕr'ĭclees
Pheræ, fee'ree
Phocis, fō'kis
Philoctetes, fĭloctee'tees
Phrynichus, frei'nĭcus
Platæa, plătee'a
Pœas, pee'as
Polydorus, pŏlĭdō'rus
Polymestor, pŏlimees'tŏr
Polybus, pŏl'ĭbus
Polynices, pŏlĭnei'sees
Polyxena, pŏlix'ĕnă
Poseidon, pŏsei'dŏn
Prometheus, promee'thyoos
Pylades, pei'lădees

Rhea, ree'a

Salamis, săl'ămis
Scythia, sĭth'ĭă
Scamander, scămand'ĕr
Scyros, skei'rŏs
Steropes, stĕ'rŏpees
Strophius, strŏph'ĭŭs
Supplices, sŭp'plĭsees

Talthybius, talthĭb'ĭŭs
Theatron, thĕā'trŏn
Themis, thĕ'mis
Thyestes, thyes'tees
Tiryus, tei'rius
Trachis, trā'kis
Trœzen, tree'zeen
Tyndareus, tin'dăroos

Zeus, zyoos